

No Place Like Home

Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs

A report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office 2019



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do leanaí
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Message from Dr Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children

Dorothy said it and she was right, *‘there’s no place like home’*.

But for over 3,700 children living in Ireland in 2019, there is no place called home.

Highlighting the impact that homelessness is having on children in Ireland has been a strategic objective for the Ombudsman for Children’s Office since 2016. We have engaged with the Government during the development of Rebuilding Ireland, we have met with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, and we have consistently engaged with the NGO sector to fully understand what is happening on the ground for children and their families.

The Government’s response to the housing crisis has included the introduction of Family Hubs – purpose built or specifically adapted premises to house children and families who are homeless. Family Hubs are an alternative to hotels and B&Bs and, while I have accepted them as a better temporary solution for homeless families in need of emergency accommodation, up until now we have not had a clear picture of the experiences of the children living there.

Six months in a Family Hub is one quarter of a two year old’s life. It is more than half of a school year for a teenager studying for their Junior or Leaving Certificate. I felt it was essential to talk to children living in Family Hubs and to hear directly from them about how this experience is impacting on their childhood.

Children told us about what it is like to share a room with their parents and siblings, what it is like to go to school from a Family Hub, to study and do homework. They told us about what it is like to have to go to bed and turn off all the lights when their younger brother or sister is going to sleep. Space, privacy, noise, not being able to have visitors, feelings of shame and embarrassment, were all issues raised by the children who talked to us.

This consultation confirmed something we already know: children are strong, children are resilient, but children are aware. Children see what is going on and they are affected. It is vital that Government addresses the issues raised by the children who spoke to us in order to ensure a high quality of accommodation for those living in Family Hubs. There is an urgent need to introduce national standards and an independent inspection mechanism to ensure the quality of Family Hubs where children are currently living.

After two years and considerable investment, we are asking the Government to take stock and to commission an independent formal evaluation of Family Hubs. What is the long term plan for Family Hubs and what will their legacy be?

I believe that the time has come to progress the conversation on including an express right to housing in our Constitution. This was a commitment made in the Programme for a Partnership Government in 2016. We can no longer allow our children to live with the overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt and anger because they are homeless through no fault of their own.

When I talk with children about their rights, the right to housing is one of the rights I tell them about. We must ensure that all children in Ireland can enjoy this right.

Niall Mulholland



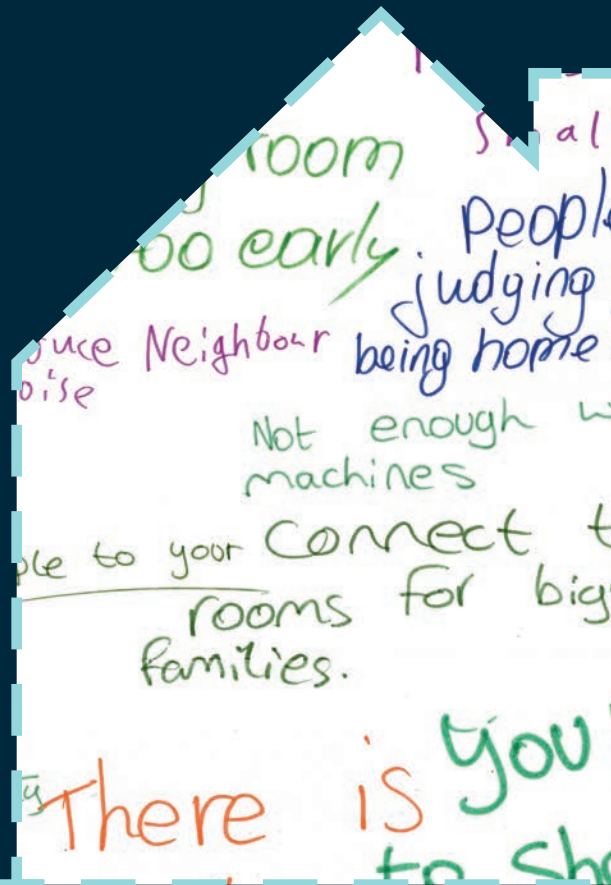
Acknowledgements

The Ombudsman for Children's Office would like to thank all of the Family Hubs who allowed us to visit them both before and during this consultation. We would also like to acknowledge and express our appreciation to the Dublin Region Homeless Executive and the management and staff of the Family Hubs for facilitating us to undertake our consultation with children. To protect the anonymity of all involved we have made the decision not to name these Hubs.

Our special thanks goes to the children who participated in the consultation. We appreciate their bravery and willingness to speak about their experiences and their openness in expressing their views and ideas.

Section 1 –

Background & Context



1.1 About the Ombudsman for Children’s Office

The Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body, which was established in 2004 under the *Ombudsman for Children Act 2002*. Under the 2002 Act (as amended), the Ombudsman for Children has two core statutory functions:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children up to the age of 18 years
- to examine and investigate complaints made by or on behalf of children about the administrative actions, or inactions, of public bodies that have had, or may have had, an adverse effect on a child.

The Ombudsman for Children reports directly to the Oireachtas in relation to the exercise of these statutory functions.

1.2 About the OCO’s consultation

One objective of the OCO’s *Strategic Plan 2016–2018* has been to influence positive change for and with children. We also work to pursue the progressive realisation of the rights of vulnerable groups of children, including those experiencing homelessness. This priority has been carried over into the OCO’s *Strategic Plan 2019–2021*.

Initiated in 2018 and concluded in early 2019, our consultation with children living in Family Hubs was undertaken in light of this strategic priority and the Ombudsman for Children’s duties under section 7 of the 2002 Act to:

- consult with children under 18 years of age
- highlight issues relating to children’s rights and welfare that are of concern to children themselves
- encourage public bodies to develop policies, practices and procedures that are designed to promote the rights and welfare of children
- advise on matters relating to the rights and welfare of children.

Background, aim and objectives of the consultation

The OCO has been concerned about emergency accommodation for families with children experiencing homelessness for some time. For several years now, families have been provided with emergency accommodation in hotels and B&Bs. Recognising that this type of emergency accommodation is unsuitable for families with children, the Government made a commitment in 2016 that by mid-2017, hotels would only be used for emergency accommodation in very limited circumstances.¹ Although families

¹ Government of Ireland, *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* (2016), p.34. Available at http://rebuildingireland.ie/Rebuilding%20Ireland_Action%20Plan.pdf.

continue to be provided with emergency accommodation in hotels and B&Bs, a policy shift emerged in 2017 through the development of what have become known as Family Hubs. The aim of Family Hubs been to provide a form of emergency accommodation that offers greater stability for homeless families, facilitates more coordinated needs assessment and support planning, including on-site access to required services (such as welfare, health and housing services), and provides appropriate family supports and surroundings.² In light of this development, the OCO was keen to learn more about what it is like for children to live in Family Hubs.

The purpose of the consultation was to give children an opportunity to share their views about, and experiences of, living in a Family Hub.³ The consultation involved meeting children, who at the time of the consultation, were living in a Family Hub. This report provides an account of children's experiences of living in Family Hubs and aims to amplify their voices.

The overall aim of the consultation was to hear and highlight the experiences and perspectives of children living in Family Hubs. In delivering this aim, we worked to achieve the following objectives:

- to engage directly with children aged between 5 and 17 years of age who live in a Family Hub
- to indirectly hear of the experience and impact of living in a Family Hub on children under the age of five years by speaking to their parents
- to support young people to reflect and share their experiences of living in Family Hub
- to enable children to identify changes, which they feel would improve their conditions while they are living in a Family Hub
- to highlight young people's views and ideas to policy-makers and practitioners working in the area of homelessness, housing and Family Hubs.

Planning and implementing the consultation

The Government has procured new properties and adapted these into Family Hubs, as well as reconfiguring existing emergency accommodation facilities into Hubs. Standards vary greatly. Some Hubs are purposely adapted and designed and others are former hotels, B&Bs and residential homes. Additionally, some Hubs are run by NGO homelessness service providers while others are run by private, commercial operators. For these reasons, it is impossible to identify a typical or standard Hub.⁴ During our consultation we visited each type of Hub.

2 *Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. Third Quarterly Progress Report (May 2017)*, p.13. Available at <http://rebuildingireland.ie/news/rebuilding-irelands-third-quarterly-progress-report/>.

3 The consultation provided insights into children's views and experiences but it is not intended to be representative of either all Family Hubs or all of the children living in them.

4 The accounts of children in this report reflect differences between Family Hubs. Some children's accounts may mention hotels or hostels. Please note that this is in reference to a building's previous use.

The OCO engaged with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE), which has responsibility for all Dublin-based Hubs, at an early stage. The DRHE provided their support for the consultation in the Dublin area and contacted selected Hubs on our behalf. The DRHE also provided us with figures they had compiled on the number and age breakdown of children being accommodated in the Family Hubs on 1 August 2018. In total, there were 580 children under 18 being accommodated in 18 Hubs in the Dublin area at that time. Over half of these children (55%) were aged 5 years or under; 33% were aged 6 to 12 years; and 12% were aged 13 to 17 years.

The consultation was undertaken between October 2018 and January 2019 at five Family Hubs in the Dublin area, two in Limerick⁵ and one in Cork. A cross section of Family Hubs was selected on the basis of the number of families being accommodated, geographic location and a mix of privately and NGO run Hubs. Contact was made with all Hubs that we had selected. All of these Hubs agreed to facilitate our consultation and a designated liaison person from each Hub was appointed to coordinate visits with the OCO staff. Information sheets for Hub managers, parents and children and consent and assent forms were distributed to the selected Hubs. The specific locations and service providers of the Hubs are not identified in this report to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. All of the views expressed during the consultation have been anonymised and identifying information has been removed from the report. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the children involved.

Who was involved?

Through the consultation the OCO engaged directly with children from 5 to 17 years of age, in three categories. We met and engaged directly with children in the following age groups:

- 5–9 years
- 10–12 years
- 13–17 years

Only two children aged 10 to 12 years participated in the consultation. Because of this small number the views of these children have been merged with those of the children aged 5 to 9 years in this report, giving an age group of 5 to 12 years.

Given that over half of the children living in Family Hubs in Dublin were 5 years of age or under, we decided to include the parents of children of this age in the consultation as a way of hearing the children's views indirectly. This is because many children under 5 do not know that they have different living arrangement to their peers.

⁵ There is, at present, some disagreement about the number of Family Hubs in Limerick City. One of the Hubs that took part in our consultation has been designated as a Family Hub by the local authority. However, because of the configuration of this facility (own door units), the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) does not recognise this as a Family Hub and does not include the families residing there in their figures on homelessness and Family Hubs.

What was involved?

The consultation process involved three visits to each Hub:

On the first visit to the Hubs we met with staff and residents to discuss the overall aims and objects of the consultation. With staff we discussed the logistics, issues of consent and assent and identified a suitable private space to hold the consultation sessions. We met with mostly adult residents to discuss how the consultation session would work, what questions we would ask their children and how we would protect the identity and privacy of the participants.

During our second visit we undertook the main consultation sessions. At the start of each consultation session we gave each participant additional information about the purpose of the project and obtained parental consent for the participation of children. The children were also asked to give their assent to ensure that they were freely taking part in the process. Any questions the participants had were addressed and assurances given regarding confidentiality. An open dialogue and participative approach to gathering information was taken by the consultation team. Participants were put at ease through general topical conversation with parents; enquiring about school, sports and other interests with young people; and by inviting younger children to engage in a 'Getting to know each other card game'. We brought along some toys and games that young children could engage with while parents were speaking. All participants were offered options regarding their preferred mode of participation: semi-structured interviews (with an option of it being recorded), drawing or sharing their opinions in writing. Visual aids were used, where necessary, with children age 5 to 12 years to enable them to express and name their emotions and feelings.

The consultation team asked all participants to address the following three questions:

- What do you like about where you live?
- What do you find difficult or challenging about living in the Hub?
- What changes would you like to see in the Family Hubs?

Our third visit to the Hubs allowed us to gain clarity and check the accuracy of what we had recorded during the consultation. We met with as many children who were involved in the consultation as possible. However, some children and their families had moved to other accommodation and some children were busy or had decided not to take part in the return visits. In total, 33 children and 24 parents were involved in these return visits. This gave both the OCO team and the children involved time and space to reflect on the information gathered and views expressed.

The views and experiences of 37 children and of 33 parents representing 43 children were gathered through this process. The age breakdown of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Age Breakdown of Participants

Children under 5 years	33 parents of 43 younger children were consulted. The children ranged from age 6 months to 4 years. Parents were requested to address the questions from their young children's viewpoint.
Children age 5–12 years	25 children in this age group were consulted.
Children age 13–17 years	12 young people in this age group were consulted.

1.3 Context for the consultation

Homelessness among families with children

In a statement to Seanad Éireann on 30 January 2019, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Minister for Housing) spoke about the injurious impact of homelessness on people's lives:

*“The most distressing aspect of the challenge we face is the damage being done to people living in emergency accommodation. Damage is being done to society and individuals and families because they have to spend time in emergency accommodation. There are too many living in emergency accommodation. It is absolutely unacceptable that people still have to go to hotels for emergency accommodation”.*⁶

Family homelessness emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland in 2014.⁷ The adverse effects of homelessness on families and children have been a focus of sustained concern and have received considerable attention in recent years, with research consolidating regular media reports highlighting the damaging impact of homelessness on family life and functioning, on children's education, and on parents'

6 Seanad Éireann debate, 30 January 2019. Available at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/se-anad/2019-01-30/12/>.

7 Hearne, R. and Murphy, M., *Investing in the Right to a Home: Housing, HAPS and Hubs* (2017), p.13. Available at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full_1.pdf

and children's physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing.⁸ A report from Temple Street Children's University Hospital on 21 January 2019 highlighted that 842 children who attended the hospital's Emergency Department in 2018 were discharged with no fixed address - an increase of 29% on the 2017 figure. According to this report, although the children's presentations are varied and complex, the majority of them "stem from the fact that these children are living in completely unsuitable, cramped and temporary accommodation".⁹

Families with children who present as homeless have been and are still being provided with emergency, temporary accommodation in hotels and B&Bs – according to the DRHE, during the week of 18 to 24 June 2018, 822 families with 1,782 children were being accommodated in hotels in the Dublin region.¹⁰ The practice of self-accommodation, which requires families to find their own emergency accommodation in a hotel or B&B that is then paid for by their local authority, continues to operate in certain circumstances, despite an acknowledgement by the Minister for Housing and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) that "self-accommodation is something we need to ... reduce and bring to a close".¹¹ Informed and driven by a recognition that hotel and B&B accommodation is wholly inappropriate to the needs of families with children, Family Hubs have emerged over the past two years as a preferred approach to providing emergency, temporary accommodation to homeless families.

The increase in homelessness in recent years has seen a corresponding increase in funding available to the DHPLG for the provision of homelessness services. In 2018, €116 million was provided by the Exchequer for homelessness services, an increase of 18% on the 2017 budget allocation.¹² Budget 2019 saw an increase of 25% in the spending budget for homelessness services, bringing the total to €146 million for 2019.¹³ According to the DHPLG, a significant proportion of funding for homelessness services is for the provision of accommodation for families experiencing homelessness,

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- 8 Walsh, K. and Harvey, B., *Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness. The Families' Perspectives* (Housing Agency, 2015), available at <https://www.housingagency.ie/getattachment/Our-Publications/Latest-Publications/Family-Experiences-Report-PDF.pdf>; Walsh, K. and Harvey, B., *Finding a Home. Families' Journeys out of Homelessness* (Focus Ireland, 2017), available at <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Walsh-and-Harvey-2017-Finding-a-Home-Full-Report.pdf>; Share, M. and Hennessy, M., *Food Access and Nutritional Health among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation* (Focus Ireland, 2017), available at <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Share-and-Hennessy-2017-Food-Access-Report-%E2%80%93-Abridged-Report-FINAL.pdf>; Scanlon, G. and McKenna, G., *Home Works: A Study on the Educational Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Living in Emergency Accommodation* (Children's Rights Alliance, 2018), available at https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Home%20Works%20Study%20on%20the%20Educational%20Needs%20of%20Children%20Experiencing%20Homelessness%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf
 - 9 See <https://www.cuh.ie/2019/01/842-children-who-attended-temple-streets-ed-in-2018-were-discharged-with-no-fixed-home-address-29-increase-on-2017-figure/>.
 - 10 Dublin Region Homeless Executive, *DRHE Quarterly Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2018*, p.4. Available at <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Q2-2018-Quarterly-Activity-report.pdf>
 - 11 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 3 October 2018, p.21. Available at https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/2018-10-03/debate/mul@/main.pdf.
 - 12 *Ibid*, p.13.
 - 13 Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2019. Available at <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2019-02-14a.304&s=%22Travellers%22+2019-02-11..2019-02-15#g323>

including families in hotels and in Family Hubs.¹⁴ The DHPLG recently informed the Children’s Rights Alliance that housing authorities spent €14.8 million on the operation of the Family Hub programme in the first nine months of 2018. Capital funding for the development of additional Family Hubs was estimated at €45 million and a significant portion of the additional €60 million in capital spending targeted at tackling homelessness is being assigned to the Family Hubs programme.¹⁵

Data relating to homeless families

The monthly data reports published by the DHPLG count people in local authority managed emergency accommodation. As such, they do not provide a comprehensive picture of the number of people, including families with children, who are homeless. The monthly data reports do not cover non-Section 10 services, rough sleeping, hidden homelessness or long-term supported accommodation. In addition, families in domestic violence refuges have been removed from the monthly data reports. In 2018, in a move that gave rise to some considerable confusion and debate, the DHPLG excluded families with children in some, but not all, ‘own door’ temporary accommodation from these monthly reports.¹⁶

Although inadequate, existing data does offer some insight into the extent of homelessness among families with children, which families are more vulnerable to homelessness, causes of family homelessness, and the provision of homelessness services to families, including Family Hubs:

- **Number of homeless families with children** – As has been widely reported, there has been a steady increase in recent years in the number of families with children experiencing homelessness in Ireland. In July 2014, the DHPLG recorded 344 families as homeless. In May 2018, the number recorded stood at 1,778.¹⁷ The number of homeless families has increased by 116% since February 2016.¹⁸ According to the most recent monthly *Homelessness Report* published by the DHPLG,¹⁹ children account for over one third (almost 37%) of the 10,264 people accessing State-funded emergency accommodation: during the week 18 to 24 February 2019, there were 1,707 families with 3,784 children accessing emergency accommodation. Of these families, almost 1,300 families with over 2,800 children were in Dublin, with the remaining families accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation in each of the eight other regions across the country. Almost 60% of these families are lone parent families.

14 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 3 October 2018, *supra* note 11, p.13.

15 Children’s Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2019* (2019), p.34. Available at https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/CRA-Report-Card-2019.pdf.

16 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 8 November 2018, pp.6-13. Available at https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/2018-11-08/debate/mul@/main.pdf.

17 Focus Ireland, <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>.

18 Focus Ireland, <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness/>.

19 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Homelessness Report February 2019*. Available at https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_february_2019.pdf.

- **Families at risk of homelessness** – Certain groups and family types are more vulnerable to homelessness than others. Research published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in 2018 reported that members of the Traveller community are most at risk of being homeless, making up 9% of the homeless population while representing less than 1% of the Irish population.²⁰ According to research published by Focus Ireland in 2018, young parents aged 18 to 24 years account for 20% to 25% of families in Dublin experiencing homelessness.²¹ Data published by the DRHE about families who newly presented to homelessness services in the Dublin region in 2016 and 2017 indicates that:
 - Lone parents made up two-thirds of families newly experiencing homelessness in 2016 and 2017, while the 2016 Census records that 24% of families in the general population are lone parents.
 - There was a higher percentage of homeless families with four or more children in 2016 (14%) and 2017 (11%) when compared with the number of family units of this size in the general population, which the 2016 Census records as being at 7%.
 - One-third of families who presented in 2016 and 2017 were “non-Irish national families”, while the 2016 Census records 12% of people in the general population as being non-Irish.²²

- **Reasons for family homelessness** – Data collected by the DRHE for 2016 and 2017 indicates that two primary reasons for family homelessness are families leaving private rented accommodation following receipt of a Notice of Termination (NOT) and leaving family or friends’ accommodation due to relationship breakdown or overcrowding.²³ In 2018, the DRHE reported that 52% of families presented to homelessness services in the Dublin region in June 2018 due to a loss of or inability to secure private rented accommodation, an increase of 8% on the January 2018 figure.²⁴

- **Family Hubs** – According to the DHPLG, at the end of 2018 there were 26 Family Hubs operating nationally with a total capacity for over 600 families - 22 Family Hubs in Dublin and one each in Kildare,

20 Grotti, R., Russell, H., Fahey, É., Maître, B., *Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland* (IHREC and ESRI, June 2018), p.ix. Available at <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Discrimination-and-Inequality-in-Housing-in-Ireland..pdf>.

21 Lambert, S., O’Callaghan, D., Jump, O., *Young Families in the Homeless Crisis. Challenges and Solutions* (Focus Ireland, 2018), p.1. Available at <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Lambert-et-al-2018-Young-Families-in-the-Homeless-Crisis-Full-Report.pdf>.

22 Morrin, H. and O’Donoghue Hynes, B. *A Report on the 2016 and 2017 Families who experienced Homelessness in the Dublin Region* (April 2018), p.11. Available at <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/A-report-on-the-2016-and-2017-families-who-experienced-homelessness-in-the-Dublin-Region.pdf>. This report also notes that demographic data for 971 of the 976 families who newly presented as homeless in the Dublin region during 2017 indicates that the majority of children in these families were between 4 and 11 years of age.

23 *Ibid*, p.9.

24 Dublin Region Homeless Executive, *supra* note 10, p.6.

Cork, Limerick and Louth.²⁵ Some of these Family Hubs are run by private operators while others are run by housing charities, such as the Peter McVerry Trust and Respond Housing. Although the DHPLG has indicated that the length of stay in Family Hubs is not currently captured,²⁶ the Minister for Housing recently reported that the average length of time families are spending in Family Hubs is about six months.²⁷ It is expected that additional Family Hubs will be provided in 2019.²⁸ It was recently reported that an unpublished Homeless Action Plan Framework for Dublin 2019–2021 drawn up by Dublin City Council indicates that more Family Hubs are planned in anticipation of a projected increase in family homelessness in Dublin over the next three years.²⁹

Given the gaps and deficits in data relating to homelessness, including in data relating to homelessness in different parts of the country and among families with children, the OCO welcomes the recognition by the Chair of the Homeless Inter-Agency Group and by the DHPLG that current data relating to family homelessness in Ireland is inadequate and that improvements are needed in data collection and disaggregation.³⁰

International human rights standards and guidance consistently underscore the central importance of effective data collection and disaggregation to support the design, implementation, monitoring and review of legislation, policy, programmes and budgets to advance the realisation of rights. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has highlighted the need for State Parties to the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR)³¹ to “ascertain the full extent of homelessness and inadequate housing” within their respective jurisdictions.³² Noting the challenges that can arise, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has emphasised that:

“adjustments ... need to be made for the inevitable limitations, omissions and possible distortions in available data. Challenges associated with measuring

25 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Social Housing Delivery 2018*, p.5. Available at https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/social_housing_report_2018.pdf.

26 Children’s Rights Alliance, *supra* note 15, p.34.

27 See Seanad Éireann debate, 30 January 2019, *supra* note 6 and Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2019, *supra* note 13. It is not clear whether this timeframe of six months encompasses time spent by some families in other forms of emergency accommodation before going into a Family Hub. Questions in this regard have previously been put to the DHPLG. See Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 3 October 2018, *supra* note 11, p.17f.

28 Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2019, *supra* note 13.

29 Kitty Holland, ‘More Dublin hubs planned as homelessness worsens’, in *The Irish Times*, 13 March 2019. Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/more-dublin-hubs-planned-as-homelessness-projected-to-worsen-1.3824852>

30 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, 8 November 2018, *supra* note 16, p.5 and p.10. See also Homeless Inter-Agency Group, *Report to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government* (2018), p.40. Available at <http://rebuildingireland.ie/install/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Homelessness-Inter-Agency-Group-%E2%80%93-Report-to-Minister-for-Housing-Planning-and-Local-Government.pdf>.

31 United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966). Available at https://treaties.un.org/doc/treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20pm/ch_iv_03.pdf

32 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No.3: The nature of State parties’ obligations* (1990), para.13. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838e10.pdf>. See also *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context* (2015), A/HRC/31/54, paras. 65-73. Available at <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/pdfs/consultations/Report-of-the-Special-Rapporteur-Leilana-Farha-EN.pdf>.

homelessness should not be allowed to encourage policies that respond only to the visible and more easily measured forms of homelessness".³³

With reference to three types of human rights indicators identified by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,³⁴ the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has recommended that housing strategies “*must ensure that adequate data on programme beneficiaries (process), housing conditions (outcome) and access to justice (structural) is collected and disaggregated by race, ethnicity, disability, age, gender and other relevant characteristics*”.³⁵ Cautioning that “[h]ousing strategies should not become so driven by statistics alone as to lose touch with ... basic human rights values”,³⁶ she has also advised that quantitative data must be accompanied by qualitative information to ensure that policy and provision are informed by and benefit from the lived experiences of those directly affected. With reference to homelessness, she has suggested that “[t]hose who are homeless ... are uniquely situated to identify shortcomings or problems in housing policies and programmes”.³⁷

International standards

Ireland ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC)³⁸ in 1992, thereby making a commitment under international law to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children set out in the Convention for all children under the age of 18 living in Ireland. Among the UNCRC’s wide ranging provisions is Article 27, which provides that State Parties to the Convention “*recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development*”. While parents or others responsible for a child have primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capabilities, the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development (Article 27(2)), States are required to take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and, in cases of need, to provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (Article 27(3)). As such, Article 27 recalls Article 25(1) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR)³⁹ as well as Article 11(1) of the ICESCR, which recognises the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and obliges State Parties to take appropriate steps to ensure the realisation of this right.

33 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2015), *supra* note 32, para.70.

34 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Indicators. A Guide to Measurement and Implementation* (2012). HR/PUB/12/5. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Human_rights_indicators_en.pdf.

35 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context* (2018), A/HRC/37/53, para.93. Available at <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/pdfs/consultations/Report-of-the-Special-Rapporteur-Leilana-Farha-EN.pdf>.

36 *Ibid.*, para.97.

37 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2015), *supra* note 32, paras.72-73 and *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2018), *supra* note 35, para.92.

38 United Nations, *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

39 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). Available at https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

Children's right to an adequate standard of living is connected to and indivisible from children's other rights under the UNCRC. Among these rights are children's rights to family support and care; to the highest attainable standard of health; to education; to privacy; to rest, play and leisure; and to protection from all forms of harm and abuse. These rights also include four general principles, which are integral to the realisation of all children's rights under the UNCRC:

- Article 2 provides that all children must be able to enjoy their rights without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of their circumstances or those of their parents/guardians.
- Article 3 requires children's best interests to be treated as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them.
- Article 6 recognises children's right to life, survival and development. In this regard, States are expected to interpret 'development' as a holistic concept encompassing all aspects of children's development and are obliged to provide optimal conditions for childhood.⁴⁰
- Article 12 provides for children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and for due weight to be given to children's views, in accordance with their age and maturity.

The interdependence of human rights, including children's rights, is discernible in how international guidance defines adequate housing. Highlighting that the right to adequate housing is about "*the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity*"⁴¹ and, as such, that it is about more than the provision of shelter, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has identified seven conditions that need to be met before forms of shelter can be deemed to constitute adequate housing. These conditions are:

- **Security of tenure** – Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.
- **Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure** – Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal.
- **Affordability** – Housing is not adequate if its cost threatens or compromises the occupants' enjoyment of other human rights.
- **Habitability** – Housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, other threats to health and structural hazards.

40 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No.5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (2003). CRC/CGC/2003/5. p.4. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fGC%2f2003%2f5&Lang=en.

41 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 4: The right to adequate housing* (1991), para. 7. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCESCR%2fGEC%2f4759&Lang=en

- **Accessibility** – Housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account.
- **Location** – Housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, healthcare services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas.
- **Cultural adequacy** – Housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity.⁴²

States' obligation to fulfil the right to adequate housing includes a duty to prevent and address homelessness. In a report to the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, the UN's Special Rapporteur on adequate housing highlighted the status of homelessness as a violation of human rights and States' corresponding immediate obligation to address homelessness:

*“The lived experience of homelessness and inadequate housing challenges the very core of what it means to be human, assaulting dignity and threatening life itself. It is these experiences that make homelessness and inadequate housing violations of human rights and not merely programme failures. ... Addressing homelessness is therefore an immediate obligation. A State must make every effort to use all available resources to satisfy the obligation to eliminate homelessness as a priority”.*⁴³

Indicative of the particular adverse effects that homelessness can have on children's growth, development, emotional wellbeing, security and access to basic services such as education and healthcare,⁴⁴ several international observers, including the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing,⁴⁵ have expressed serious concerns about the significant increase in family homelessness in Ireland in recent years. In 2015, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights voiced its concerns about the “[g]rowing number of families and children that are homeless or are at risk of being homeless as a result of the lack of social housing and the inadequate levels of rent supplement” and recommended that the State should “[t]ake all the measures necessary to meet the critical needs of those who are homeless or who are at risk of being homeless”.⁴⁶ Equally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child made the following observations following its examination in 2016 of Ireland's progress towards fulfilling its obligations to children under the UNCRC:

“The Committee is deeply concerned at reports of families affected by homelessness facing significant delays in accessing social housing and frequently living in inappropriate, temporary or emergency accommodation on

42 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Habitat, *The Right to Adequate Housing. Fact Sheet No.21* (2009), p.4. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf. See also UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *supra* note 41, para. 8.

43 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2018), *supra* note 35, paras. 10 and 18.

44 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Habitat, *supra* note 42, p.20.

45 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2015), *supra* note 32, para. 45.

46 *UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding Observations on the third periodic report of Ireland* (2015), E/C.12/IRL/CO/3, paras. 26(e) and 27(e). Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2fC.12%2fIRL%2fCO%2f3&Lang=en

a long-term basis. The Committee urges the State party to undertake measures to increase the availability of social housing and emergency housing support. In doing so, the State party should ensure that the housing and support provided through these measures are appropriate to the needs of the children affected and subject to adequate safeguards, reviews and evaluations".⁴⁷

Developments in legislation and public policy

Legislation

Commenting in 2005 on Ireland's opt out of Article 31 of the *Revised European Social Charter*,⁴⁸ which concerns the right to housing, the European Committee on Social Rights observed that Ireland "has difficulties with the concept of the right to housing per se".⁴⁹ This observation continues to have resonance. The absence of an express right to housing in Ireland's Constitution or of a statutory right to housing in primary legislation is well documented. The impact of this lacuna on cases coming before the courts and, as such, on people's access to an effective remedy through the courts has been highlighted.⁵⁰ While the matter of providing for a constitutional right to housing has been considered to varying degrees by the Oireachtas on several occasions during the past two decades,⁵¹ no substantial progress has been made.

In this regard, the 2016 *Programme for a Partnership Government* (2016 Programme) makes explicit reference to the eighth report of the Constitutional Convention on economic, social and cultural rights,⁵² which recommended that the State progressively realise economic, social and cultural rights subject to maximum available resources, that this duty be recognisable by the courts, and that specific additional rights on housing be inserted into the Constitution. The 2016 Programme includes a corresponding commitment to refer this report to what was at the time a new

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- 47 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland* (2016), CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, paras. 61 and 62. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fIRL%2fCO%2f3-4&Lang=en.
 - 48 Council of Europe, *Revised European Social Charter* (1996). Available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007cf93>.
 - 49 European Committee of Social Rights, Council of Europe, *Report on the Meeting with the Irish Government on Provisions of the Revised Social Charter not accepted by Ireland, Dublin, 4 October 2005* (2005), p.17. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentid=090000168048bb60>
 - 50 See IHREC, *The provision of emergency accommodation to families experiencing homelessness* (July 2017), p.4, available at <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2017/07/The-provision-of-emergency-accommodation-to-families-experiencing-homelessness.pdf>. See also three reports by Mercy Law Resource Centre, namely: *The Right to Housing in Ireland* (2016), available at http://www.mercylaw.ie/_fileupload/Right%20to%20Housing%20Report.pdf, *The Right to Housing in Comparative Perspective* (2018), available at http://www.mercylaw.ie/_fileupload/MLRC%20Second%20Right%20to%20Housing%20Report.pdf, and *Children and Homelessness: A Gap in Legal Protection* (2018), available at http://www.mercylaw.ie/_fileupload/Children%20and%20Homelessness_%20A%20Gap%20in%20Legal%20Protection.pdf
 - 51 Connolly, J., 'A Constitutional Right to Housing: A Tale of Political Sidestepping', in Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, *Working Notes, Issue 80, October 2017*, pp.32-38. Available at <https://www.workingnotes.ie/images/stories/Issue80/A-Constitutional-Right-to-Housing-A-Tale-of-Political-Sidestepping.pdf>
 - 52 The Convention on the Constitution, *Eighth Report of the Convention on the Constitution. Economic, Social and Cultural (ESC) Rights* (March 2014). Available at http://escr-irl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CC_ESC_Report.pdf

Oireachtas Committee on Housing “for consideration”.⁵³ In the intervening period, a motion was passed by the Dáil and Seanad in 2017 to refer the report to the Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach.⁵⁴ The report has yet to be considered by this Committee.

Specific provisions relating to housing and housing supports are included in primary and secondary legislation, in particular in the *Housing Acts 1966 to 2015*. The Ombudsman for Children has previously expressed concerns about the invisibility of children in housing legislation – Section 2(a) of the *Housing Act 1988* (1988 Act) makes no reference to children and no special provision for families with children, referring only to “any other person who normally resides” or “who might reasonably be expected to reside” with a person who presents as homeless.

Of further concern are the limited statutory entitlements that families with children have in relation to housing⁵⁵ and the considerable discretion that housing authorities have as regards the type of accommodation and support they may provide to people, including families with children, who are homeless.⁵⁶ It is a matter for each housing authority to determine whether a person who presents as homeless is to be regarded as such and under Section 10(1) of the 1988 Act, housing authorities “may”:

- make arrangements, including financial arrangements, with approved bodies, relating to their provision of accommodation for a homeless person
- provide a homeless person with such assistance, including financial assistance, as it considers appropriate
- rent accommodation, arrange lodgings or contribute to the cost of such accommodation or lodgings for a homeless person.⁵⁷

This discretionary power has been used to provide different types of accommodation, including accommodation for homeless families in hotels, B&Bs and Family Hubs.

Additional legislation has been enacted to provide a statutory structure to address the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness.⁵⁸ Legislation has also been enacted, which seeks to prevent people, including families with children, from becoming homeless and therefore from having to access emergency homelessness accommodation as well as to facilitate people to leave emergency homelessness

53 *Programme for a Partnership Government* (May 2016), p.20. Available at https://www.merrionstreet.ie/Merrion-Street/en/ImageLibrary/Programme_for_Partnership_Government.pdf

54 See Dáil Éireann Debate on Housing Policy, 20 June 2018. Available at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2018-06-20/84/>

55 Mercy Law Resource Centre, *Children and Homelessness*, supra note 50, p.9.

56 IHREC, supra note 50, p.5 and Mercy Law Resource Centre, *Children and Homelessness*, supra note 50, p.10.

57 *Housing Act 1988*. Available at: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1988/act/28/enacted/en/print>

58 Chapter Six of the *Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009* (available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2009/act/22/enacted/en/html>) provides a statutory structure to address the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness. Section 37 requires Housing Authorities to adopt a ‘homelessness action plan’ to specify the measures proposed to be undertaken to address homelessness, including with regard to the prevention of homelessness and the provision of services, including accommodation, to address the needs of homeless households. Sections 38 and 39 require Housing Authorities to establish a homelessness consultative forum and a management group. These sections were commenced in February 2010.

accommodation.⁵⁹ While an analysis of the operation of such legislation is outside the scope of this report, the OCO is aware of challenges that have arisen and concerns that have been raised, including with regard to the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme.⁶⁰

In July 2017, the *Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017* was introduced to Dáil Éireann. This Private Members' Bill seeks to insert a new Section 10A on 'Homeless persons and children' after Section 10 in the 1988 Act. Currently at Third Stage in the Dáil, this Bill is welcome. While limited in scope, the proposed Section 10A does seek to achieve a number of important objectives, namely:

- to make explicit reference to and thereby make children visible in the 1988 Act
- to require local authorities when they are making a decision on a request by a family for accommodation or assistance to:
 - recognise the people concerned as a family unit
 - regard the best interests of the child as a paramount consideration
 - have regard to the need “*by practical means*” to protect and assist families, including by providing them with safe accommodation and in order to support both “*the effective functioning of families*” and “*the development, welfare and protection of children within a family home*”.⁶¹

The Government's confirmation in November 2017 of its intention to support this Bill is welcome.⁶² It is regrettable, however, that the Bill has not progressed in the interim. Whether in the context of further examination of this Bill or otherwise, more attention needs to be given to strengthening the existing statutory framework for the provision of emergency accommodation to homeless families with children. Approaches taken in other jurisdictions merit examination, including approaches highlighted in a series of recent reports on the right to housing published by the Mercy Law Resource Centre. The most recent of these reports focuses on children and highlights how other

59 *Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2014*. Available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/21/enacted/en/html>. *Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act, 2016*. Available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2016/act/17/schedule/enacted/en/html>.

60 See, for example, Hearne, R. and Murphy, M., *supra* note 7; Threshold, *Housing Assistance Payment needs to be reformed to address homelessness* (March 2018), available at <https://www.threshold.ie/news/2018/03/28/housing-assistance-payment-needs-to-be-reformed-to/>; Morrin, H. and O'Donoghue Hynes, B., *supra* note 22; Homelessness Inter-Agency Group, *supra* note 30; Focus Ireland, *Observations on the Homelessness Inter-Agency Group's Report to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive's Report to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government* (2018), available at <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Commentary-on-the-HAIG-and-DRHE-reports-final.pdf>; Children's Rights Alliance, *supra* note 15; Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market XIII: The Gap between Rent Supplement/HAP Limits and Market Rents* (March 2019), available at <https://www.simon.ie/Portals/1/EasyDNNNewsDocuments/219/Simon%20Communities'%20Locked%20Out%20of%20the%20Market%20XIII.pdf>.

61 *Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017*. Available at <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/bill/2017/100/eng/initiated/b10017d.pdf>.

62 See Dáil Éireann debate, Wednesday, 15 November 2017 at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2017-11-15/34/>.

jurisdictions have provided, among other things, for:

- a statutory right to shelter for individuals with dependent children who apply to their local authority for homeless accommodation
- a statutory duty on the part of local authorities to have regard to the best interests of an applicant's dependent children and to ensure that accommodation provided to such an applicant is suitable for occupation by children
- a ban on the use of B&B accommodation for applicants who are pregnant or have children except in very limited circumstances and for a very limited period of time.⁶³

Public policy

The 2016 *Programme for a Partnership Government* made a commitment that a new Cabinet Minister for Housing would draw up an Action Plan on Housing in collaboration with stakeholders, including local authorities, housing agencies and the voluntary sector.⁶⁴ This Action Plan would include, but would not be limited to, the actions set out in the 2016 Programme in relation to housing and homelessness. Among these actions were to support more medium-term emergency accommodation for homelessness families,⁶⁵ to implement a range of measures to prevent families from becoming homeless and to end the use of unsuitable emergency accommodation, such as hotels and B&Bs, for homeless families by in part delivering rapid-delivery housing units.⁶⁶

While national public policy frameworks relating to children and young people reference housing and homelessness,⁶⁷ *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* (Rebuilding Ireland) is the Government's core public policy initiative as regards addressing the housing and accommodation needs of families with children. Published in 2016, Rebuilding Ireland does not include a single reference to rights, including the right to housing. Nonetheless, it has been cited by the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as an example in the context of identifying a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach as a key principle of effective housing strategies.⁶⁸

Recognising that “*the long-term solution to the current homelessness issue is to increase the supply of homes*”,⁶⁹ Rebuilding Ireland sets out five pillars. The first

63 Mercy Law Resource Centre, *Children and Homelessness*, *supra* note 50.

64 *supra* note 53, p.20.

65 *Ibid*, p.22.

66 *Ibid*, p.134.

67 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures. The national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020* (2014), available at https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomesBetterFutureReport.pdf; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020* (2015), available at <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/20151008NatYouth-Strat2015to2020.pdf>; Government of Ireland, *First 5. A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (2018), available at https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/early-years/19112018_4966_DCYA_EarlyYears_Booklet_A4_v22_WEB.pdf

68 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing* (2018), *supra* note 35, para.59.

69 *Ibid*, p.33.

pillar focuses on addressing homelessness and includes objectives to “provide early solutions to address the unacceptable level of families in emergency accommodation” and to “deliver inter-agency supports to people who are currently homeless”.⁷⁰ Rebuilding Ireland notes that “families with children presenting as homeless require a response that is separate and distinct from presentations by adult individuals and couples” and that “accommodating family units in hotel arrangements is inappropriate for anything other than a short period of time”.⁷¹ Accordingly, Rebuilding Ireland includes a commitment that by mid-2017, hotels would only be used for emergency accommodation in very limited circumstances. As noted earlier in this report, this commitment has not been fulfilled.

In addition to looking at accommodation for homeless families, Rebuilding Ireland also sets out a range of other support measures, including:

- appointing dedicated child support workers through an initiative by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)
- providing assistance by Home School Liaison and School Completion staff to children and families experiencing homelessness to maintain regular school attendance
- providing access to free public transport for school journeys and outings away from the emergency accommodation
- providing access to crèches and preschool services for homeless families
- introducing a pilot project to support the family functioning of homeless families in emergency accommodation by providing off site or near site family time, including play, homework, cooking and washing facilities, family support and parent support
- addressing the nutritional needs of families and children
- promoting a joined up approach between education, health and Tusla to meet the needs of homeless families, by using the existing Children and Young People’s Service Committees
- producing and reviewing a safety guidance/voluntary code for child safety in emergency accommodation with relevant stakeholders.⁷²

At the time of its publication in 2016, the OCO welcomed the inclusion of specific measures in Rebuilding Ireland relating to children and families. Noting the identification of specific Government Departments and State agencies with responsibility for implementing these measures, the Ombudsman for Children highlighted the importance of ensuring that inter-agency arrangements would be adequately resourced.⁷³ The establishment in September 2017 of a Homeless Inter-

70 *Ibid*, p.33.

71 *Ibid*, p.34.

72 *Ibid*, pp.35-36.

73 Ombudsman for Children’s Office, ‘Ombudsman for Children encouraged by focus on children in Housing Action Plan – now urgent implementation needed’ (20 July 2016). Available at <https://www.oco.ie/news/ombudsman-children-encouraged-focus-children-housing-action-plan-now-urgent-implementation-needed/>.

Agency Group to support a more coherent, coordinated approach by the State to addressing homelessness has been a welcome development. It is our hope that ongoing work by this Inter-Agency Group will help to ensure that challenges which homeless families continue to experience, including supporting children's health, wellbeing and education, are addressed.

The Inter-Agency Group recommended in its first report in June 2018 that Family Hubs should continue to be developed in order to minimise the use of hotels and B&Bs to accommodate homeless families with children.⁷⁴ This recommendation can be seen as a further consolidation of a policy shift that emerged in 2017 as regards the State's response to providing emergency accommodation to homeless families with children. Rebuilding Ireland itself contains no mention of Family Hubs. However, as Ahearne and Murphy note, following Respond's establishment of a co-living space for families in Drumcondra in Dublin in late 2016, the then Minister for Housing indicated in early 2017 that he was looking to increase the number of "family hub type services".⁷⁵ Family Hubs were subsequently referenced in the third quarterly progress report on Rebuilding Ireland published in June 2017:

"Supported temporary accommodation arrangements such as family hubs will provide homeless families with a greater level of stability than is possible in hotel accommodation while move-on options to long-term independent living are identified and secured. Furthermore, such arrangements will facilitate more coordinated needs assessment and support planning including on-site access to required services, such as welfare, health, housing services, and appropriate family supports".⁷⁶

In July 2017 Dublin City Council commissioned nine new Family Hubs and announced plans to recommission at least five existing hotel-based emergency accommodation centres as Family Hubs.⁷⁷

In September 2017 the Minister for Housing announced a further €10 million in funding for more Family Hubs, to be drawn down in 2017 as demand arose from local authorities.⁷⁸ In a statement following a subsequent Housing Summit in January 2018, the Minister for Housing indicated that he had asked local authorities to prepare proposals for the development of more Family Hubs located close to communities where families are experiencing homelessness.⁷⁹ As noted earlier, according to the *Social Housing Delivery 2018* report, there were 26 Family Hubs operating nationally by the end of 2018 with a total capacity for over 600 families: 22 Family Hubs in Dublin

74 Homeless Inter-Agency Group, *supra* note 30, p.36.

75 Hearne, R. and Murphy, M., *supra* note 7, p.15.

76 *Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. Third Quarterly Progress Report*, *supra* note 2, p.13.

77 Hearne, R. and Murphy, M., *supra* note 7, p.15.

78 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Statement by Minister Eoghan Murphy following Housing Summit* (8 September 2017). Available at <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/statement-minister-eoghan-murphy-following-housing-summit>

79 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Statement by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government following Housing Summit in January 2018* (22 January 2018). Available at <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statement-eoghan-murphy-following-second-housing-summit-local-authority-chief-executives>.

and one each in Kildare, Cork, Limerick and Louth.⁸⁰ In February 2019, the Minister for Housing indicated that further Family Hubs are to be provided:

*“as hubs provide a greater level of stability than is possible in hotel accommodation, with the capacity to provide appropriate play-space, cooking and laundry facilities, communal recreation space, while move-on options to long-term independent living are identified and secured”.*⁸¹

The recognition that families with children presenting as homeless require a different response and steps taken to reduce the reliance on hotels and B&Bs to accommodate homeless families are welcome. However, the extent to which Family Hubs have emerged as a key measure to address the emergency, temporary accommodation needs of homeless families is noteworthy given:

- the lack of an evidence base to underpin this approach
- the absence of an initial pilot phase to demonstrate how it might work
- concerns raised when Family Hubs started to emerge about the inconsistent experiences of families living in different Family Hubs and about the impact that living in the quasi-institutional and regulated environment of Family Hubs may have on different aspects of family life and functioning.⁸²

While Family Hubs may be preferable to hotels and B&Bs, this does not mean that they are necessarily an appropriate approach to meeting the emergency, temporary accommodation needs of homeless families. Of some concern is that, despite a recognition that Family Hubs may be an inadequate form of emergency accommodation,⁸³ a relatively consistent narrative has evolved alongside the proliferation of Family Hubs to suggest that they are a suitable short-term, temporary solution.⁸⁴ Taking into account the investment and corresponding increase in Family Hubs over the past two years, it is essential that Family Hubs are independently monitored and inspected against agreed standards. Moreover, the suitability of this approach needs to be independently evaluated in order to determine how it might be improved and whether it should be superseded by an alternative approach to the provision of emergency, temporary accommodation for homeless families, such as the rapid-delivery housing units committed to by the Government in the 2016 Programme.

80 Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *supra* note 25, p.5.

81 Dáil Éireann debate, 14 February 2019, *supra* note 13.

82 Hearne, R. and Murphy, M., *supra* note 7, p.2f and p.34; IHREC, *supra* note 50, p.9; Children’s Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2018* (2018), p.33, available at https://www.childrensrightrights.ie/sites/default/files/files/files/report_card_18.pdf.

83 See Committee of Public Accounts debate: Vote 34 – Housing, Planning and Local Government, 28 February 2019. Available at https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/committee_of_public_accounts/2019-02-28/4/.

84 See, for example, discussions during a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on 3 October 2018, *supra* note 11.

Standards and inspection

In relation to standards, the DRHE has developed a *National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland* (NQSF) in consultation with stakeholders. This development is welcome. Standards are an important administrative measure to support the consistent delivery of quality homelessness services and the monitoring of these services. They can also function as a mechanism to facilitate service users to hold providers to account where there are shortfalls that need to be addressed and improvements that need to be made.

From a children's rights perspective, it is particularly welcome that the NQSF and the accompanying *Quality Assessment and Improvement Workbook* recognise children as service users, acknowledge children's status as individual rights holders and undertake to facilitate children's exercise of their rights in the context of their engagement with homelessness services. Specific references are made to ensure that:

- children are provided with accessible, age-appropriate information
- their needs and perspectives are considered in relation to support planning with their families
- their complaints are considered and dealt with in the context of a child-friendly complaints system
- their safety and welfare are provided for in accordance with child protection requirements
- the physical environment of homelessness accommodation is sensitive to children's safety and wellbeing and includes outdoor play space
- children's education and welfare are supported through the engagement of relevant support services.⁸⁵

The inclusion of these child-specific standards should help to ensure that homelessness services for families with children are delivered in a child-centred way that gives appropriate consideration to children's rights, needs and best interests.

The Children's Rights Alliance noted recently that the NQSF has been implemented through 20 pilot projects in three phases and that the DHPLG plans to review the NQSF with all stakeholders in advance of the framework being fully implemented.⁸⁶ While the considered approach taken to the development of the NQSF is commendable, its implementation nationally should be progressed without undue delay. Although the Minister for Housing indicated recently that “[g]uidance on the national implementation of a quality standards framework will be issued to all local authorities before the end of Q1 2019”, it is unclear what the timeline is for commencing the actual implementation of the NQSF nationally.⁸⁷

85 Dublin Region Homeless Executive, *National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland. Quality Assessment and Improvement Workbook* (2018), p.11, p.14, p.17, p.20, p.46ff, p.59, p.69 and p.113. Available at <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/our-work/quality-standards>.

86 Children's Rights Alliance, *supra* note 15, p.36.

87 See <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-02-20a.140&s=housing+8450%2F19#g141.q>.

Furthermore, in order to ensure appropriate monitoring, oversight and accountability of service providers, a mechanism for independent, statutory inspection needs to be put in place. A Private Members' Bill, the *Emergency Homeless Accommodation and Direct Provision Independent Inspection Bill 2018* is at Second Stage before Dáil Éireann since June 2018. This Bill aims to amend the *Health Act 2007* to grant the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) the power to inspect emergency homelessness accommodation funded by the DHPLG as well as Direct Provision Centres.⁸⁸ Whether via this Bill or otherwise, swift progress to provide for the independent, statutory inspection of homelessness services is needed alongside the implementation of the NQSF nationally.

1.4 Areas of concern and priorities for action

Having regard to relevant international standards and developments concerning family homelessness in Ireland, and taking into account the experiences and perspectives shared by children, young people and parents living in Family Hubs who took part in the OCO's consultation, areas of concern and corresponding priorities for action from the OCO's perspective are as follows:

1. Legislation

Legislation is a key general measure to progress the realisation of human rights, including children's rights and including their right to adequate housing.⁸⁹ In light of Ireland's obligations under relevant international standards and the commitment made in the 2016 *Programme for a Partnership Government*, it is of considerable disappointment that the recommendations made in the eighth report of the Constitutional Convention on economic, social and cultural rights have not yet been considered by the Oireachtas. **The OCO believes that the issue of enumerating the right to housing in the Constitution needs to be progressed as a matter of priority and therefore strongly encourages the Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach to examine the eighth report of the Constitutional Convention without further delay.**

Public policy and provision in relation to homelessness needs to be underpinned by appropriate primary legislation. Existing primary legislation is inadequate. Of particular concern is that the provisions of the 1988 Act limit the obligation on local authorities to an assessment of whether a person who presents as homeless is to be regarded as such and provide housing authorities with considerable discretion as regards the type of accommodation and support they may provide to people who are homeless.

⁸⁸ *Emergency Homeless Accommodation and Direct Provision Independent Inspection Bill 2018*. Available at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2018/60/>.

⁸⁹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *supra* note 32 and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *supra* note 40.

Existing legislation should be strengthened to require housing authorities to provide appropriate accommodation and supports to homeless families with children. Taking into account the concept of ‘adequate’ housing and corresponding aspects of the right to adequate housing set out in international guidance, **such statutory provision should include explicit requirements on housing authorities as regards the availability, adequacy and accessibility of homelessness accommodation.** Furthermore, while aware of existing concerns about providing in legislation for statutory time limits on the amount of time people may spend in emergency accommodation, the OCO is very concerned about the negative effects that protracted stays in emergency accommodation are having on children and families. Legislative safeguards are needed in relation to the amount of time that homeless families with children spend in emergency accommodation and the OCO is of the view that **the 1988 Act should be amended to place a time limit on the amount of time that families may spend in emergency accommodation.** In this regard, the circumstances of the current homelessness crisis should not preclude a further examination of this matter by Government and the Oireachtas.

As regards children, the invisibility of children in the 1988 Act is of serious concern to the OCO. Although limited in scope, the *Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017* seeks to achieve a number of important objectives. **The OCO would like to see detailed examination of the *Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017* progress and encourages consideration to be given to approaches taken in other jurisdictions to providing statutory and regulatory safeguards for homeless families with children.**

2. Policy and provision

While appreciating that addressing the needs of homeless families is a public policy priority and that it has been acknowledged that the practices of self-accommodation and of providing emergency accommodation to families in hotels and B&Bs must end, we are deeply concerned about the extent to which these practices are still in operation. While there may be a reluctance to do so, **the OCO is of the view that timelines need to be put in place for bringing an end to the practices of self-accommodation and providing emergency accommodations to families in hotels and B&Bs.** It is worth noting the guidance of the UN’s Special Rapporteur on adequate housing that goals and timeliness are human rights obligations and that while goals and timeliness “*should not be so ambitious as to be unachievable, ... they must reflect the urgency of addressing violations of human rights*”.⁹⁰

Family Hubs have emerged as a preferred alternative approach to addressing the emergency, temporary accommodation needs of homeless families without an evidence base for this approach or an initial pilot phase. The perspectives shared by children, young people and parents who participated in the OCO’s consultation point to real difficulties that living in Family Hubs present for them, notwithstanding the efforts and kindness of staff working in the Hubs. While Family Hubs may provide a measure of stability and security, the accounts of children and parents highlight the negative

90 Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (2018), *supra* note 35, para.90.

impact that living in this type of environment is having on family life; parenting; individual and family privacy; children's ability to get adequate rest and sleep; children's health, wellbeing and development; children's ability to learn and study; children's opportunities for play and recreation; children's exposure to inappropriate behaviour, aggression and fighting; children's freedom of movement; and children's ability to maintain relationships with extended family and friends.

In light of the experiences and perspectives shared by children and parents and given the ongoing investment in and corresponding proliferation of Family Hubs, the OCO is of the view that **standards need to be implemented in relation to all Family Hubs around the country without delay** in order to ensure that requirements are met and that there is consistency of provision across different Hubs, including with regard to the facilities and supports available to children, young people and parents. Furthermore, **an independent, formal evaluation of the suitability of Family Hubs as an approach to providing emergency, temporary accommodation needs to be undertaken as soon as is practicable in 2019 in order to establish what improvements need to be made, whether this approach should be pursued, and whether it should be complemented or superseded by an alternative approach to the provision of emergency accommodation for homeless families.**

3. Data

Gaps and inadequacies in current data collection and disaggregation relating to homelessness are well documented. We welcome commitments made to improving data collection and disaggregation given its vital importance for taking an evidence-informed approach to legislation, public policy and corresponding provision. **The OCO encourages prompt progress to be made during 2019 as regards the development and implementation of improved practices in data collection and disaggregation concerning homelessness among families with children.**

Measures are also needed to improve access to and transparency of data in the interests of promoting a shared understanding of the data. The DHPLG could build on its current work in this area by compiling and publishing monthly, quarterly and annual reports that provide a clear, reliable, authoritative, adequately comprehensive and readily accessible source of data for use by all stakeholders.

Taking into account the guidance published by the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, the OCO also believes that **measures to improve data should include a stronger focus on providing for a systematic approach to the collection, analysis and publication of qualitative information to ensure that developments in policy and provision are informed by the experiences and perspectives of people directly affected, including homeless families and children.**

4. Standards and inspection

The considered approach taken to the development and piloting of the NQSF for homelessness services and, in particular, the child-specific standards included in the NQSF is to be welcomed. **The OCO encourages national implementation of the NQSF to be progressed without delay.** In order to ensure appropriate monitoring, oversight and accountability, **a mechanism for independent, statutory inspection of homelessness services needs to be put in place as a matter of priority.** In light of serious concerns that have been highlighted in relation to homelessness accommodation for families, including by children and parents who took part in the OCO's consultation, the OCO wishes to see appropriate statutory provision being made during 2019 for the independent inspection of homelessness accommodation.

5. Complaints handling

The OCO welcomes the inclusion of a specific standard in the NQSF for homelessness services in relation to complaints-handling and the corresponding commitments made as regards ensuring that appropriate complaints procedures are in place and that staff are provided with training to deal with complaints. In particular, we welcome the commitment that homelessness services for children and families will consider complaints made by children and deal with complaints from children in the context of a child-friendly complaints system. Given the diversity of providers of homelessness accommodation to children and families and the likelihood that providers will have varying degrees of experience in dealing with formal complaints, including complaints from children, **all providers of homelessness accommodation need to be supported to take a consistent approach to complaints-handling that is in keeping with good practice. In this regard, the OCO encourages and can support the DHPLG, the DRHE and local authorities to make providers of homelessness accommodation to families aware of the OCO's *Guide to Child-Centred Complaints Handling*,** which sets out core principles of good practice for dealing with complaints made by or on behalf of children.

6. Combating stigma, supporting dignity

Recognising, promoting and supporting the dignity and worth of every person lies at the core of human rights. The right to adequate housing is in part about the right of every person to live somewhere in dignity. As the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has emphasised, homelessness is a violation of human rights in part because it is an assault on human dignity.

One of the most concerning features of the perspectives shared by children and young people who took part in our consultation is the consistency with which they referenced feeling embarrassed and ashamed about being homeless and about living in a Family Hub. Similarly, parents consistently spoke about feeling they had failed in their role as parents. These expressions of shame and failure underscore the very real corrosive impact that homelessness can have on people's sense of their own dignity and worth. Such feelings necessarily exacerbate the already challenging circumstances that parents and children who are homeless find themselves in.

No child or young person should feel ashamed because they are homeless. No parent should feel they have failed as a parent because they and their children are homeless. **The OCO believes that measures must be devised and implemented not only to combat any stigma associated with family homelessness, but to support the inherent dignity and worth of children and parents experiencing homelessness.** Further attention should be given to identifying additional practical measures (for example, an increase in therapeutic supports and child support workers) that could be implemented to support the resilience, dignity and self-worth of children and parents while they are living in emergency accommodation. Politicians and policy-makers should consider how they can integrate a message into their public statements about family homelessness that is focused on combating stigma and affirming the dignity of children and parents who are experiencing homelessness. Similarly, the media might examine how their coverage of homelessness can contribute to promoting the dignity of children and parents who are homeless.

Section 2 –

Children's Experiences of living in a Family Hub

Why here is that
ve room for kinds
nd do there work To vi

4

me
do Live
I a lot of time here. My brother The toddler room.
• I want to have a place where I can have visitor's. And when I'am sick they can come over!
e } 😞 } I dot like the rules.
g
The room's are to small.
I don't like this Hub
bold We get sick realy easely

As outlined in Section 1.2 of this report, the views and experiences of 80 children were gathered both directly and indirectly in the consultation process. The three questions asked of all young participants and parents representing their children under the age of 5 were:

- What do you like about where you live?
- What do you find difficult or challenging about living in the Hub?
- What changes would you like to see in the Family Hubs?

Their responses to these questions are provided in this section of the report.

2.1 What children like about living in a Family Hub

The parents of the **children under five** identified safety and stability; the availability and kindness of staff; and cooking and laundry facilities on site as the positive aspects of living in the Family Hubs.

With regard to the **safety and stability** that the Hubs provide, this was both appreciated by parents on behalf of their children but was also relative to more precarious, previous living arrangements.

The mother of Myles aged 13 months said that the Hub

“provides a safety net with security here all the time ... having a roof over our heads and an opportunity to have somewhere to call home for the time being and it provides a bit of stability”.

Fionn⁹¹ (aged 3) had been *“in and out of hotels since he was 7-months”* with his mum. His mother considered that the Hub

“... provides some stability, at least we know where we are going to be, not like in the hotels”.

One mum summarised the positive aspects of the Family Hub for her youngest son as follows:

“It’s better than a hotel or street or another person’s house. The Hub is clean, we are not hungry or dirty”. (Mother of Ali, aged 17 months)

Parents commented upon the **helpfulness and support received from staff in the Hubs**. For some parents having staff onsite offered reassurance and increased their sense of safety for their children.

“There’s 24-hour help here, much better than a hotel”. (Mother of Fionn, aged 3)

⁹¹ The names of all of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.

The **facilities and activities available for children** varied from Hub to Hub. However, where good facilities were available the advantages of these for their children was reported by parents. Two of the eight Hubs we visited had a child-support worker on site. A number of parents also mentioned other positive aspects of the Family Hubs including cleanliness and opportunities for young children to socialise and interact with other children.

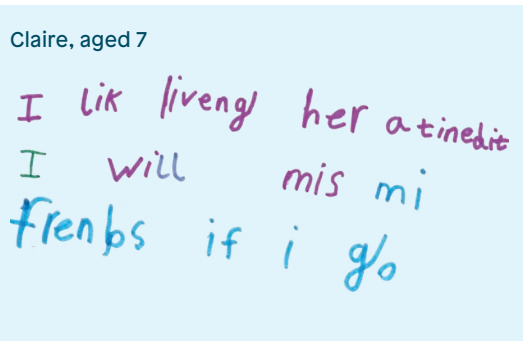
“The actual Hub like, it has benefits. It has like toys, plenty of toys ... there’s a playground out the back. Then there’s the group activities that Esther [the child-support worker] organises, and other kids for him to interact with”. (Father of Conor, aged 1)

The facilities and activities for children varied between the Hubs. Two Family Hubs had obtained funding to provide a short yoga course for young children which was well attended by the children and appreciated by parents. Staff in a number of Family Hubs arranged social events for children, including parties and outings. Having cooking and laundry facilities and the provision of meals in some Hubs were also identified by parents as being positive for their children.

“Here there is a garden, they can play and meet other kids. He can go to crèche from 2-6pm ... Taj is mixing with other children, they have a programme for kids, books and toys ... Also, here I cook for the family every day, I can wash our clothes. Big difference from the hotel”. (Mother of Taj, aged 3 and Kareem, aged 1)

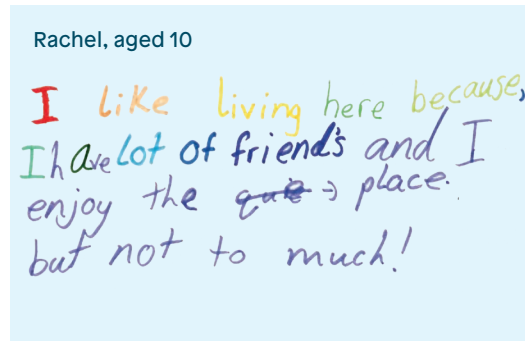
For **children aged 5–12 years** there was only one good thing about living in the Family Hub and that was **making and having friends** there.

Claire, aged 7



I lik living her a tinedit
I will mis mi
frenbs if i go

Rachel, aged 10



I like living here because,
I have lot of friends and I
enjoy the ~~gate~~ place.
but not to much!

Depending on the rules within each Hub children were able to mix and play with each other in shared spaces. In Hubs where there was shared space children seemed to benefit from interacting with each other and making friends. Most Hubs involved in the consultation had a play room. However, children in the 5–12 age group often felt that the toys and space provided were more appropriate for toddlers. Some, but not all, Hubs had outdoor play space with equipment where children could play together. The children in these Hubs identified this as a positive feature of where they lived.

Alex, aged 9

I like playing
I like having a lot
of friends

Ben, aged 5, identified the
slide as his favourite thing
about the Hub.



Jakob, aged 8

I like playing here and
have friends.

Children who are living in Hubs where there are child-support workers on site focused on the activities organised by these workers as positive experiences. When asked this question Charlie, aged 5, told us "I don't like anything here, I only like the yoga".

It is important to note that several young children involved in the consultation could not identify anything positive that they liked about living in the Hub. In a number of cases, when asked what was good about living in the Hub, children simply answered with the word "nothing".

Ibrahim, aged 5

I dot like living
here.

Roisin, aged 9

Nothing

Noah, aged 10

I hate everything
here.

Some children in an attempt to identify positives uncovered further negative feeling. For example, one child told us about how good the security was in the Hub, but how this also put restrictions on her.

“Em, there is really top-notch security here, sometimes the doors have a lock on them ... and it makes me feel trapped”. (Lena, aged 9)

Children identified that spending time outside the Hub offered them a positive release. Several children told us that they tried not to spend too much time in the Hub, only returning to go to bed.

Chloe, aged 7



getting in out
and going to school

Staff, facilities and food were the main good things about living in a Family Hub identified by the **children aged 13–17 years**.

“The staff is really important, they are always trying to be helpful as they can they ask about school, what exams I have”. (Amelia, aged 16)

“The staff is great. The bleedin’ – the things that they do for the kids like the events, they’re good”. (Sean, aged 16)

Some Hubs had rooms where young people could study and access computers, others did not. In Hubs where these facilities were in place young people identified this as a positive.

Mariam, aged 14 and her brother Mohammed, aged 16

Computers
upstairs

“You can use the computers whenever you want, which is good...and there is a TV room. I get food, you get chips, mashed potato, lasagne and stuff, it’s nice and you get a free breakfast”. (Jonathan, aged 13)

Depending on where they lived previously, some children in this age groups said that their situation is comparatively better to that and could be worse. For some of these older children who had been living in overcrowded housing with extended family, the Hub was viewed as comparatively better in some ways. The Hub offered them their own bed, which they did not have before. Others had been “sofa surfing” with their families and several had moved from B&Bs and temporary hotel accommodation. While being clear in their views that the Hub was not perfect, they felt that it offered more stability than their prior living arrangements.

“This place is good, I like it here. There is bad things about here as well. I do have a bed to sleep in at night time, some people don’t”. (Anna, aged 16)

One child summed up the positives for him quite starkly by stating:

“I have a place to stay and I like the food”. (Harry, aged 13)

2.2 What children find difficult about living in a Family Hub

It is not surprising that many challenges and difficulties were identified both by children themselves and by parents when discussing the under-fives. For some parents, the experience for their **very young children** was entirely negative. One mother expressed the view that the only good aspect of living in the Family Hub is that her daughter might not remember the experience.

“It is not ideal for kids, but at least she is young, she’s still only a baby and won’t remember it”. (Mother of Ciara, aged 2)

Several common themes were identified as challenges by the parents of **children under 5 years** of age, which included; lack of space and privacy, excessive noise and tension between residents. Other parents expressed concern for their children’s development and mental health and others discussed the difficulties they had with parenting in the Hub setting.

The lack of **space and privacy and the excessive noise** were seen by parents to have a number of negative impacts on their very young children. The majority of families who live in Family Hubs have one room with an en-suite bathroom, while those with bigger families have two such rooms. Parents raised concerns about how much space their children had to learn to crawl and walk and reported that their children felt confined.

“There is not much space for the children to crawl”. (Father of Eva and Leo, 13-month old twins)

“He feels like he is in a box ... The space is small, he is confined to one room, and he tries to run out as soon as the door is open”. (Mother of Ali, aged 2)

“My child is like wild when she gets outside – and she gets outside like she’s like some child that has been locked up in a cage”. (Mother of Megan, aged 17 months)

Several parents explained the difficulty with space as their children grew older.

“Our room it’s starting to get smaller now, you know, because she’s getting bigger, so there’s not much room for her to move around now”. (Mother of Aoife, aged 16 months)

The proximity of the toilet to the space where children could play was a problem identified by a number of parents.

“We are all in one room it has a double bed and two cots. It is hard to keep the boys from playing in the bathroom. Taj opened a packet of soap pods and got a chemical burn”. (Mother of Taj, aged 2 and Kareem, aged 1)

Due to the nature of living in close proximity to other families, many parents with children under 5 struggle with **the noise** in the Hub. While parents acknowledge that this is normal, it can still be difficult to manage. This is especially challenging at night, resulting in broken sleep patterns and sleep regression for their children.

“Loud noises and some fights in other rooms sometimes wake the baby ... and it’s hard to get him back to sleep”. (Mother of Liam, aged 1)

“She refuses to sleep in a cot now so she’s in the bed with us so – and like we don’t – we get very little sleep ... we goes to sleep with her, she won’t because of the noise in here like it’s – people banging doors, shouting, kids, do you know? The walls are so thin you can hear everything”. (Mother of Megan, aged 1)

Parents reported tensions within and between families living in the Hubs. They told us that this frequently resulted in arguments and shouting and, on occasion, physical fights. In addition to the noise this can create, parents felt that their children were being exposed to inappropriate behaviours, including drug and alcohol use.

“People make a lot of noise they get drunk and make noise. There are lots of disagreements”. (Father of Moussa, aged 3 and Cara, aged 1)

This put enormous strain on families who are attempting to shield and protect their children from these behaviours.

“I put on music so that the children can’t hear the shouting and screaming – the children are learning swear words and bad behaviour”. (Mother of Ahmed, aged 4, Fahim, aged 3 and Amara, aged 1)

“Well, there’s a lot of residents that scream and shout, and be very abusive towards their children. And then you have a lot of residents that’s on drugs in

the building – and that doesn't even hide it, or try to hide it. So, there's just too much that goes on in here". (Mother of John aged 4 and Myles aged 2)

This resulted in many parents feeling that their children needed to be heavily supervised and that they needed, as parents, to be extra vigilant.

"[Outside the Family Hub] parents must have 100% supervision, here you have to supervise 200%...the children are more exposed to things here". (Father of Moussa, aged 3 and Cara, aged 1)

Parents of the under-fives also identified additional challenges associated with **having a normal family life** in Family Hubs. These included challenges to parenting; establishing and maintaining routines for children; infection control of childhood illnesses; lack of family support particularly for young parents from their immediate families which parents considered is unfair and limiting to children's family life. Concerns for their young children's physical and psychological development were also expressed.

Parents reported that living in a Hub presented a unique set of parenting challenges. In addition to sleeping difficulties, these also included issues with eating, behaviour and discipline. These issues were compounded by the challenges of shared space, the different parenting styles of the residents and the involvement of Hub staff. Parents found these combined issues distressing, difficult to deal with and were aware of the impact on their young children. This made parenting more difficult.

"You cannot parent properly in here, it is impossible not to get angry with them". (Mother of Amhed, aged 4, Fahim, aged 3 and Amera, aged 1)

"We have two rooms, but every single night he comes in with us, whereas before he would just go off to bed. He has become very clingy to me. I've put a lot of work into him now... to help him manage his emotions... At night-time you have to try to keep them quiet, everything to do with parenting, it is so hard in this environment". (Parents of Oisín, aged 3 and Niamh, aged 1)

Several parents reported negative changes in their children's eating habits and routines in the Hubs.

"... it affects everything around him, like since Cathal came in here, like, he doesn't really eat. I'm lucky to get a meal into him a day. And then he's still on, like, his formula". (Mother of Cathal, aged 2)

With so many children living in close quarters parents reported that their children were frequently sick. In some Hubs this was managed well and infection notices were clearly displayed. However parents in other Hubs explained that that the staff had not informed them of outbreaks of childhood infections and that this had put their own and other children at greater risk of illness.

"I was informed there was three other cases in the hotel/hub, and I said to them, 'You didn't tell anybody. There was no notice put up in the lift to let people

know anything was going on ...' I informed them the Saturday saying 'I think she's hand, foot and mouth'. I informed them on the Sunday I came back [from hospital]. Again, on the Monday I informed another – another staff – member of staff. The notice wasn't put up until the Wednesday". (Mother of Megan, aged 17 months)

Some parents expressed the view that living in the Hub was having a detrimental effect on their children's psychological development. Other parents described attachment and development issues that concerned them.

"... he has attachment issues as well since he came here. Like, I'd be lucky even to get him out, if he comes over and grabbed me by the two legs, and, like, literally won't let me go. Sometimes I wouldn't even get him to walk down the corridor with me on his own ... It's just his speech that I'm worried about, he's booked in for the public health nurse next week, for his check-up ... loud noises and screaming he gets very upset over other residents screaming ... Like, there's a lot of things that's affecting him". (Mother of Cathal, aged 2)

"Bedtime is the biggest challenge for me. I cover his toy-box with a sheet, lights out, so I'm sitting in the dark. The other night I went out to get a glass of water, he woke up and panicked and screamed. He has to be by my side all the time". (Mother of Fionn, aged 3)

One parent summarised her children's challenges arising from living in the Hub as follows:

"It's a lot on their mental health ... Us as grown up people feel like that, what are our kids feeling like?" (Mother of Megan, aged 17 months)

A number of parents told us that they were awaiting assessments of need for their children, thereby indicating that their children had notable development and/or behavioural issues.

Both parents and children struggled with **not being allowed to have visitors** in the Hub. While rules varied, and some Hubs allowed visitors, they were generally admitted to only one area and were not allowed in the bedrooms. Parents were particularly concerned that they were unable to involve grandparents in their children's home lives.

Visiting arrangements were particularly challenging for couples who did not live together in the Hub. One mother describes her routine to allow her daughter Caoimhe to see her father:

"So, I have to bring my child out at six o'clock in the evening, out into the cold, or we have to find somewhere to go that she can see her daddy... We're sitting in a café just for an hour, do you know what I mean, or even just a half an hour. It all depends on her, her mood. Do you know what I mean? And she's always excited to see daddy, but she freaks out when she's leaving at times. Like she does get so upset – and it breaks my heart for her".

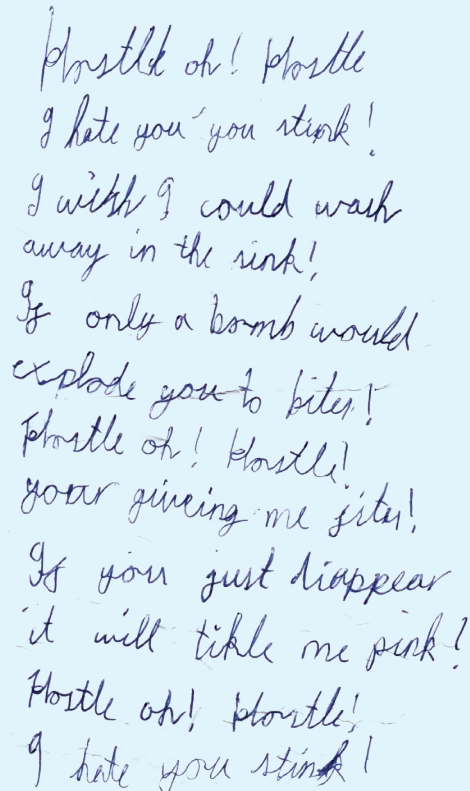
For some parents, the most significant of all unmet expectations is the delay in moving on to alternative accommodation and the resulting longer than expected stay in the Family Hubs. Some parents felt that their families had been forgotten about.

"I think it's terrible for children to live in a hub. Like, don't get me wrong, I know it could be a lot worse... But I think this is no place. Like, my child seeing her first, second... this is her second Christmas here... People have been born here and now they're after having their first birthday". (Mother of Áine, aged 2)

"Like, when we moved into these hubs, at first it's only supposed to be three months – because your longest stay would be three months and you'd have a house and all by then, like, but the housing crisis is that bad, that-there is nowhere for them to actually put us, or for them to get us to rent, like, so we basically are stuck here now again, do you know? And I never wanted them to be in this situation. I never wanted to have to put them through this situation. So, it hurts me that we're here". (Mother of John, aged 3 and Myles, aged 2)

In speaking about what is bad or difficult about living in a Family Hub, a number of the children aged 5–12 expressed their **overall dislike of the Hub** and their desire to leave as soon as possible.

Zara, aged 10

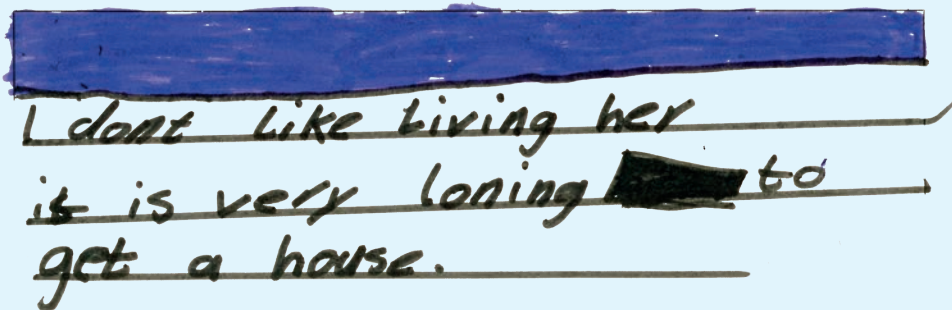


Hostle oh! Hostle
I hate you you stink!
I wish I could wash
away in the sink!
If only a bomb would
explode you to bits!
Hostle oh! Hostle!
you're giving me jitters!
If you just disappear
it will tickle me pink!
Hostle oh! Hostle!
I hate you stink!

For some children their unhappiness in the Hub was so great that, despite their very young age, they tried to run away. Hannah (aged 8), cried and told us that the Hub was “like a children’s jail”. She expressed extreme worry and fear for her younger brother Niall (aged 5) who had tried to run away from the Hub on several occasions. She told us that when her mother was having a shower she would sit on a chair in front of the door so her brother could not run away. Niall had sneaked out of the Hub once already and threatened to throw himself out of a bedroom window.

Darragh (aged 5) told us that he had tried to run away from the Hub and frequently told his parents that he was “packing his clothes and leaving”. Darragh asked the OCO staff if they had a house, and when he was told that they did, he stated that “that is not fair”. Several children echoed this sense of unfairness and injustice and struggled to understand why they did not have a house to live in.

Hannah, aged 8



I don't like living here
it is very long to
get a house.

Like the parents of the under-fives, all of the **children aged between 5 and 12** identified a **lack of space and privacy** as among the biggest challenges that they faced living in a Hub. Children expressed frustration with being confined to one room with their family with many identifying that having their own room would be the change that they would like in the Hubs. Children were frustrated and sometimes angry about a lack of space to play, to do their homework and relax on their own. Rachel (aged 10) told us that she wanted a garden because she “used to plant stuff in our garden” and that it made her cross that she could not do that now. Three out of the eight Hubs visited by the OCO did not have a garden which compounded children’s feeling that where they lived now was not a home.

Some children described how they have tried to adapt to the lack of space and privacy that arises from their entire family living in one room.

“Well, sometimes I have to read in the toilet if my sister wants to go to sleep. I love reading, my favourite book is Harry Potter”. (Lena, aged 9)

For some children the **noise** in the Hub presented real difficulties.

“I can’t get any sleep because there’s people screaming in the hallway, and there’s people banging in the hallway, and, like, people just playing out in the

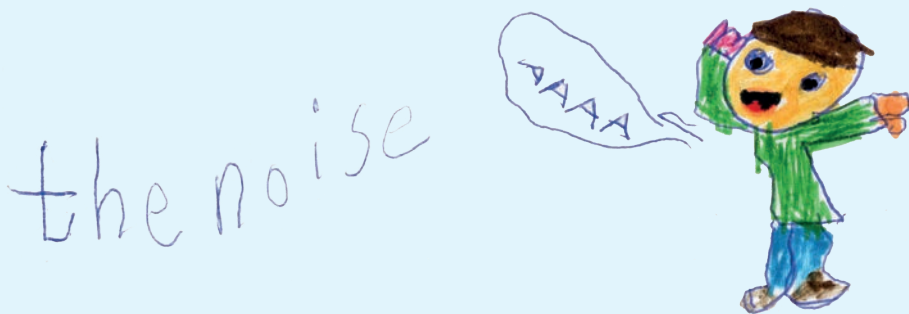
hallway like that, you know? And other people are trying to sleep. So that's why we'll just get a house, right now, like. I can't live here ... someone get me a house fast because I can't live here. It's too annoying". (Patrick, aged 10)

"[I'd like my own room] because the babies wake up at night, in the night, so much. And that's annoying ..." (Lucy, aged 7)

Children reported that excessive noise in the Hub is often linked with tensions within and between families living in the Hub. The children told us that they had witnessed arguments and, on occasion, physical fights between adults. Due to the shared and limited nature of space in the Family Hubs it is clearly difficult for children to be shielded from these arguments and fights. However, fighting in the Hubs is a major source of stress and fear for them. For example, Chloe (aged 7) told us that one of her biggest sources of unhappiness in the Hub was noise caused by fighting. She explained that she and her mum tried to make it into a game, trying to guess what the "screaming" might be about. She explained the impact of this on her as follows:

"... the noise keeps me awake, I feel tired when I go to school. I feel like my eyes feel like they are about to go to sleep". (Chloe, aged 7)

Chloe, aged 7



Zainab, aged 9

I dont like noise and fighting and screaming child.

Noah, aged 10

To many arguments and
noise



Zack, aged 10

my room is vere
small
sooooo much noise



Rules, policies and procedures vary greatly between Hubs but commonly cause children frustration and confusion. The children that participated in the consultation frequently identified the rules as a feature of the Hubs that they did not like. Three areas are particularly important to the children aged 5–12. These are the **rules relating to visitors**, the **rules relating to supervision by their parents**, and the **rules about pets**.

Some Hubs allow **visitors** in designated areas of the Hub, but others do not allow any visitors at all. This was a great source of upset for many children who wanted their friends to be able to visit.

Rachel, aged 10

I don't like they way
we can not have any
visitor's it is not fair!



Children often wanted their friends from school to visit and to be able to have sleepovers.

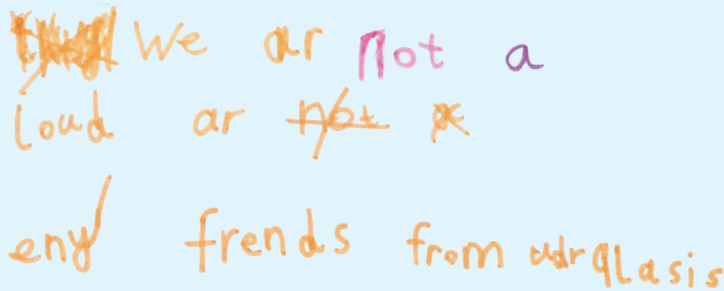
"I like nothing about living here, I have none of my friends here, I can't do a sleep over ... [it] makes me feel sad. There's nothing nice about how I feel". (Charlie, aged 6)

Charlie went on to describe what his room would be like if he moved out of the Hub telling us:

"It's going to be a three bunk 'cos one for sleepovers and one for me and my brother".

We asked Charlie what would make it more fun or easier for him to live in the Hub. He told us that *"having sleep-overs"* would help, adding that he was lonely and didn't *"feel cosy and happy here"*.

Claire, aged 7



*We are not a
loud or the
any friends from school*

In addition to restrictions on external visitors, most of the Hubs involved in the consultation did not allow children who lived in the Hub to visit each other's rooms. This created further frustration and sadness for the children.

"Once I asked someone who lives here to my room, my Mum agreed with it, her Mum agreed, she agreed and then someone knocked on the door and said 'she can't go there'. I felt sad 'cos even if you are best friends you can only meet them in the meeting room". (Lena, aged 9)

The rules prohibiting external visitors and having other children in their room was compounded for some children by the lack of spaces where children could meet and play in some Hubs.

Hannah, aged 8

I have no friends here
We are not a allowed
visitors. we have on
garden.

The **rules relating to children's supervision by their parents** are broadly similar in each of the participating Hubs. Children were usually not allowed to be unsupervised at any time and, as visitors are not allowed in some Hubs and not in family rooms, this means that they are primarily supervised by their parents. This rule, along with the restrictions on visitors, was a cause of frustration for many children. Not having a quiet space to do their homework without their parents and siblings was also difficult for some children.

"The rules are very strict. The worst is that you are not allowed to have friends in your room. They just expect you to sit on your own. And not being allowed to be anywhere without your mam, you're not even allowed to sit in the room for 10 minutes by yourself. I know it has safety issues but nothing is going to happen ... If we break the rules we will get kicked out. It's like a prison ... it's just horrible".
(Rebecca, aged 10)

"The thing is my little sister stops me from doing my homework in my room, but if I come to the homework room, my sister still has to come with my mam and she stopping other kids that are up there as well. So most of the time I have to do my homework in my room, I just can't cope". (Rachel aged 10)

Pets are not allowed in the Family Hubs. Several children described the distress and upset that they felt when they could not take their pets with them to the Hub and talked about how much they missed them. Eoin (aged 5) told us that what he disliked the most was that his dog could not move in with him and drew a picture of him and his dog playing:

Eoin, aged 5



This sense of loss and frustration was also expressed by Zara (10) in her drawing of her cat.

Zara, aged 10



While most children in this age group did not expressly speak about their mental health, they expressed **feelings of sadness, confusion and anger** throughout the consultation that indicate that their mental health and well-being is being negatively affected by their experience of living in the Hub. Frequently children said that they felt sad.

“Some days I didn’t even want to wake up because I didn’t want to face this day ... I am tired in school. Some days I would just sit there and not even smile”.
(Rachel, aged 10)

Other children reported sleeping difficulties and having nightmares since moving into the Hub. Lucy (aged 7) told us that she did not like where she lived and described her nightmares.

“... well, sometimes at night, it’s like something’s popping up. I jump up out of my dream”.

Shame and embarrassment at living in the Hubs was frequently expressed by the children in this age group. To try to cope with this many children had decided not to tell their friends where they lived because they felt worried that their friends would judge them for being homeless.

Kim, aged 10

I don't like to tell my friend that i live in a hotel, and i don't like the room because it small for us 3 people and i don't like the food. ~~and~~ because they might make fun of me.

“...friends want to come to my house and I said we can’t... it made me feel sad and embarrassed”. (Chloe, aged 7)

This sense of embarrassment was frequently articulated by children who just wanted to be able to do the same thing that their class mates and peers were able to do. Claire (aged 7) said that she did not tell her friends where she lived because *“it is weird to talk about it”*.

Some children in this age group had chosen to give their friends some information about where they lived. While some told us that their friends were understanding, they still experienced difficulties at times.

“Most of my class know that I don’t have a proper house, but they don’t know that I live with like 100 families”. (Lena, aged 9)

“Everybody in my class knows where I live. They know because they can’t come here. My friends are supportive when you express your feelings and emotions. Sometimes we would be doing Irish and the teacher would ask me to say where I live but I am not able to answer that because I live in hotel, not a house or anything. I just hate living in here ... [cries] It’s just really hard living in here”. (Rebecca, aged 10)


The nature of **communal living** in the family hubs means that children live in very close proximity to each other. Where there is communal space, this offers the opportunity for children to play together. However, it also means that children have no other option but to spend time with each other, which can lead to tensions between children and bullying was reported by a number of children.

“I don’t like living here because I get bullied”. (Lucy, aged 7)

Roisin, aged 10

Some times people are mean.

Ben, aged 5



HUGE BULLY

Jakob, aged 8

I don't like when some
one hit me and call
me bad names

Grace, aged 6

I Don't like when people
are being mean to me

In response to incidents of children fighting with each other some Hubs had made the decision to restrict children from playing in the hallways outside of their rooms, and re-enforced the policy that children could not be unsupervised. Additionally, children told us that their parents had stopped allowing them to play with other children in the Hub.

It is notable that **children in the 13–17 years age group** expressed very similar difficulties and dislikes to those in the younger age group. Just like younger children they struggled with **lack of space, privacy and noise**. Arguably this age group is most significantly affected by issues of space and privacy. Most spoke of some form of sharing beds or small rooms and the impact that this had on their privacy.

“... me and Dad are in the same room, in bunkbeds. It's like hard because like it's like no privacy ... My Dad is out like on Mondays and Wednesdays and

Thursdays in the mornings ... and then that's like the only time I get like kind of privacy in the room that I'm on my own". (Emily, aged 16)

"I share a room with my sister and my Dad. I share a bed with my sister ... it's a mission to get a shower! The size of the room and sharing is difficult ... We've been here for 7 months now". (Olivia, aged 17)

Even where families have more space it is still a challenge sharing with parents and siblings.

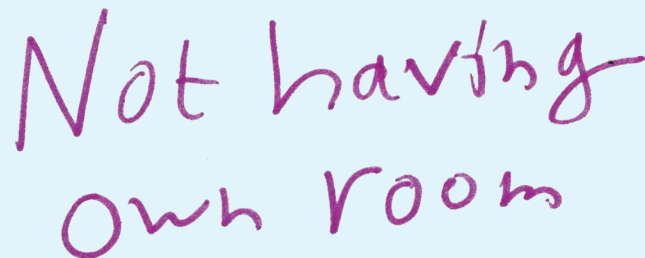
"So, because we are a [large family] we have two rooms and a bathroom. It's very cramped with bunk beds ... The bunk beds, oh I hate them, I hit my head so many times. I'm on the bottom bunk. I'm a petite size, just 1m 60 cm. I can't imagine if someone of 1m 70cm was here". (Amelia, aged 16)

Bunk beds and cramped space were frequently raised as a frustration. Sean described what it is like to share a bunk with his sister and her baby:

"There's not enough room ... she'd be on the bottom bunk and I'd be on the top bunk, and the baby would be in the cot ... I have one shelf for my stuff on the top shelf and then she has her stuff on one little shelf for her and the baby like ... and she has her make-up and all that kind of stuff and the baby's toys". (Sean, aged 16)

Sharing a room with sometimes all of their family members was a constant difficulty for these children.

Zainab, aged 14 and Mohammed, aged 16



Not having
own room

The children in this older age group described how they adapted to the confined space and the needs of their family, often prioritising the needs of younger siblings over their own needs. They often described using humour to cope with the new sleeping arrangements.

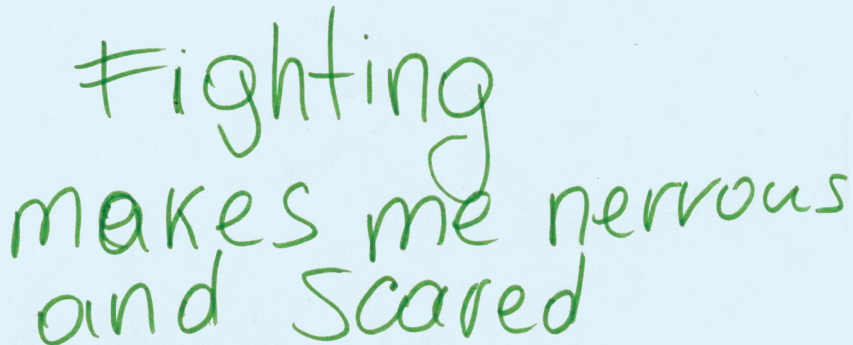
"Our room is small, so we're close in space ... we've got used to seeing each other so naked, we never saw that before! (laughs) ... and yeah, it's lights out, we all go to bed at the same time ... we never had to do that before either". (Anna, aged 16)

Similar to the young children and parents of under-fives, older children had difficulties with the **noise** in the Hubs.

“There is a lot of noise from the babies, that’s understandable, but they do wake me up”. (Anna, aged 16)

Cristina (aged 15) and her sister Lara (aged 13) described the noise in their hub telling us that there was a lot of *“slamming doors and screaming”*. The tensions between neighbours that often resulted in increased noise levels worried many of the children in this age group.

Lara, aged 13



Fighting
makes me nervous
and Scared

The teenagers in this age group described **a sense of isolation** both within the Hub and in their everyday lives. Often there were few or no other teenagers living in the Hub and therefore they did not have support from peers who were in the same situation.

“Yeah, it would help if there were more people my own age, there’s nobody my own age here, they’re all like in their 20s”. (Emily, aged 16)

“The only people I can talk to is adults, they put in like different rules that I’m not allowed to be around them and all this kind of stuff... because some of them, like the staff knew that they could smell cannabis in the building... so now I’m only allowed to be around other people in the daytime, but like, I don’t have anyone my own age to hang around with”. (Sean, aged 16)

This isolation extends to their relationships outside the Hub and they described the embarrassment and the stigma that being homeless brings.

“I haven’t told my friends, I will tell them eventually, but not right now ... I just don’t want to say it in the open. I don’t want them thinking my family can’t keep a house or anything cos that’s not the problem. My boyfriend knows ... I’ve told him the situation ... he knows it’s communal living ... he doesn’t judge. But I won’t tell him the address”. (Anna, aged 16)

“I just feel embarrassed like kind of living here. I think it’s like embarrassing that I don’t live in like an apartment or a house ... they ask like, “do you want to come out today? Whereabouts do you live, let me knock for you” but I just say ‘No, I’ll meet you somewhere”. (Emily, aged 16)

“I don’t tell people I live here, it’s a homeless hub ... it’s embarrassing. It’s horrible, it’s not nice”. (Thomas, aged 16)

Some of the children had decided to tell their friends where they lived and how they coped with this by not talking about it further or through humour.

“I have told two people and we don’t really talk about it ... they were like, really, that’s sick [bad], but it’s, like, I got used to it”. (Amelia, aged 16)

*“We joke about it ... that I’m homeless, and I go my address? Family Hub. And we just started laughing. F*** it, I just joke about being homeless, but it’s true, but it’s not good ... it’s actually like it’s not”. (Sean, aged 16)*

Children in this age group also struggled with the fact that **visitors were not allowed in the Hubs** and the restrictions this placed on their freedom and relationships with friends. This contributed to feelings of being imprisoned.

Cristina, aged 15 and Lara, aged 13

No visitors
allowed
(it feels like we
are in a cage,
because no one can
visit us.)

The impact of living in the Hub on **older children’s mental health and well-being** was articulated by many participants in terms of **feelings of embarrassment and shame, anger and sadness**. Coping mechanisms among this age group included talking to people in similar situations, talking to us (and sometimes for the first time ever) through the consultation process and, more negatively, becoming withdrawn.

“Sometimes I feel cross ... I just cry sometimes, I just keep it to myself. It’s hard, my Mum has some friends who are homeless and they have kids my age sometimes we go to a church party and we can talk”. (Jonathan, aged 13)

“It’s hard to say out loud ... Yeah saying it out loud is hard. I talk to my Mum, but I wanted to do this to get a point across for other teenagers”. (Anna, aged 16)

“When I used to live in my house like I’d be doing loads of stuff like going out to my friends more often or like I’d be like – I don’t know in dancing seven days a week and all and like then I’d be going on walks like with my dog. I used to have a dog. But since I have been here I quit dancing and I don’t go to my friends that often I just – I like sitting in”. (Emily, aged 16)

However, many of these older children kept their feelings of shame, embarrassment and sadness to themselves.

*“Like – it affects me sometimes. Well – I’d be on my phone or something and then like bleedin’ – I’ll just sit there and just think like, ‘F*** I’m homeless’ do you know what I mean? I’ll say I’m actually in the situation where I really, we really have nothing. Do you know what I mean? All I have is the people around me ... That’s the only thing I have”. (Sean, aged 16)*

Many of the challenges facing teenagers living in the Family Hubs – lack of space and privacy, communal living, stigma and the absence of a feeling of a home – are articulated in the following statement by Anna, aged 16.

“I don’t like that there’s not much privacy, like, you’re going to the fridge to get your drink and you have to come out of your own room and there’s other people around. And it feels less comfortable, there’s other people around the kitchen. Staying in the one room with my mother and sister is hard. Like I used to share with my sister, but it was spacious, I had my own big double bed. It is kinda difficult to be in one room. It’s weird coming out of our own home and then coming here and it’s shared. I don’t really like that. You think should I get dressed, people looking at you and that. I know it’s a house and everything but it’s not a home. I don’t look forward to coming back here or anything. It’s a place we live in with bedrooms and bathrooms, but it’s not a home I enjoy coming back to. I don’t want to cry or anything ... coming back from school you are just sitting in the bedroom ... You can’t bring your own family over or your friends over like you used to. I do appreciate but I do get upset. In school if you talk about the topic, it’s like I’d be in this place like, I understand it more now that I’m in this place”.

2.3 Children’s Recommendations for Change

Given that there is substantial overlap in the challenges identified for the under-fives by their parents and by children in both the 5–12 years and 13–17 years age groups, there is also significant commonality in the recommendation they made for change.

Addressing the housing crisis and providing housing

Overwhelmingly, the strongest and most frequent recommendation for change is that families do not have to live in Family Hubs but are instead provided with, or are better supported to get, long-term housing. Responsibility for doing this was firmly placed at the Government’s door, with the lack of control of landlords and rents and limited house building all being identified as issues that need to be addressed.

“If you change small things [in the Family Hub] the bigger problems are still there. This is emergency accommodation, the emergency is the problem”. (Father of Eva and Leo, 13-month old twins)

“Well, the only thing you would change is the fact that you had your own home. That’s it basically. Your own privacy. Not people watching every move that you’re making”. (Mother of Jack, aged 2)

“Like we need homes or we need people to better help us even – for landlords to accept HAP – for the sake of the kids. For somewhere for the kids like”. (Mother of Megan 17 months)

“Get them out of here, that’s the only thing ... I don’t want to go under the hand of a landlord again. I don’t want the HAP, I want a permanent home, not a landlord who will higher up the rent or sell the house”. (Father of Moussa, aged 3, and Cara, aged 1)

Roisin, aged 9

A photograph of a child's handwritten text on a light blue background. The text is written in cursive and reads "ge + a hosue".

Hannah, aged 8



Noah, aged 10

I also
want a Home

"There should be more public housing around this place ... What I want the government to do or to know, is that I hate this place, I am not going to lie I just hate this place. I am fine in here it is just my sister is the problem, she isn't a problem but I want better for her. She shouldn't have to be raised in this place, this is where she was first walking and crawling and stuff". (Rachel, aged 10)

"Are they [the Government] in charge of landlords? Tell the landlords to keep the prices down and to build more houses". (Lena, aged 9)

"[The Government] stopped building in the recession and now the price of houses are ridiculous, there's so many people without homes no one can be affording €1,500 a month of a three bedroomed house. People just can't afford it ... I do think the government can do better. The government needs to do so much more, more money invested. Like family hubs are grand, but it's not home, it's not normal, it isn't your home". (Anna, aged 16)

Cristina, aged 15, and her sister Lara, aged 13

There are a
lot of empty
buildings. Renovate
them and make
them houses for
homeless people.

“[the Government need] to sort out the homeless crisis ASAP ... I'm 16 and I'm homeless ... like how f***ed up is that?” (Sean, aged 16)

Increased space

While wanting to move on from the Family Hubs as quickly as possible, all groups of participants in the consultation wanted to have more space while living there. This was seen as a way to increase their privacy and address some of sleep problems identified. The parents of the under-fives also recommended sound proofing rooms as a way of addressing these issues and the high levels of noise in the Hubs. A concrete recommendation from the children is that they have their own room separate to that of their parents. In addition, many parents and children recommended that the Hubs provide more than one communal space and space for visitors. The provision of a separate study space for children, as well as outdoor play space and gardens in Hubs that don't have these, were also recommended. These recommendations were seen as ways to address some of the isolation from friends and families, the issues for very young children regarding development and study concerns for children.

“The rooms are too small, everyone wakes up when Kareem wakes and I can't leave the children even for a few minutes. I feel tired a lot”. (Mother of Taj, aged 2 and Kareem, aged 1)

“Having a proper visitor's room, a visitor's room for family even ... that's my main thing right now so that he [child's father] can come in, you know, to see his daughter” (Mother of Caoimhe, aged 2)

“I'd make it bigger, I'd have my own room, my sister and my Mum have their own room, my Dad have his own room. I would change the rules. The rooms are pretty small. Some families have to break up into two rooms”. (Lena, aged 9)

Zara, aged 10



Grace, aged 6

I want my own room

"I don't like the room because it is small for us 3 people ... I would get a bigger room for us". (Kim, aged 10)

"A place to study, that's a facility I wish was here, I'm in 5th year, but I'd like an actual place to study". (Amelia aged 16)

"There's a small room I go up there to do my homework, I do want to study, but it could be more comfortable, it needs better internet connection to do projects for school. I've no way of researching and that ... If they had a room for young people, where you could hang out and watch a movie, be able to have friends and family visit". (Anna, aged 16)

Better facilities within the Family Hubs

Recommendations were made by all groups of participants about the facilities in the Hubs separate to those related to space. The parents of the under-fives recommended that better cooking facilities, with more cookers and more space, are necessary in order for families to be able to cook for their children. They also recommended that the Hubs should consider providing safe places for young children whilst their parents are cooking.

"A bigger kitchen and more washing machines ... when I go into the kitchen everyone is using the stuff and I can't get to it". (Mother of Aoife, aged 1)

Reduce restrictions of freedom in the Family Hubs

For all of the children aged over 5, the rules and restrictions placed on them by the Hubs presented difficulties and they recommended various changes in these. For most, however, they want to be able to have at least some time on their own without parental supervision, more freedom to come and go from the Hub without scrutiny and to be able to have visitors. The rules that they want to see changed are evident in the following examples.

Kim, aged 10

I would like to change
that parents have to
come with you to eat
and to do stuff on computers
and i would get a bigger room
for us

Ibrahim, aged 6

I would change the
rules so I could
play by myself

"The signing in and signing out, it's not the same as home ... it's very different ... I just think the cosiness of it all, this is not very comfortable, it's not normal. At home you can walk around naked if you want to make your cup of tea. Here, you've to come out of your room, lock your room, have a key to the cupboard, have a key to the fridge, put all the stuff back, go back to your room. Ask for a key to the freezer, ask for a wifi pass, sign in, sign out, you can't bring visitors over, your family can't your friends can't. You can't sit up in your room or on the couch in the sitting room and watch a movie ... you have to clean up straight away ... you just can't put a plate in the sink and leave it". (Anna, aged 16)

"It's really annoying that you have to tell staff you're going and they have to open the gate. Every morning every time I come after school, I have to click and ask them to open the gate...it's frustrating to have to tell someone you are going. I felt like it was a prison". (Amelia, aged 16)

"I have to go everywhere with my Da, even if it's just next door to the shop, I'd like to be able to be on my own whenever he goes out and have my best friend over to visit". (Harry, aged 13)

“... a garden and outdoor space, allow visitors to come to our room or the living room and the kitchen and living room to be opened for a longer period of time”.
(Mohammed, aged 16)

Mariam, aged 14

I want to have
my own home.
Too many restrictions
Here.

Better relationships between children living in the Family Hubs

For the children in the 5–12 age group, one of the changes they would like to see in the Hubs is better relationships between the children and an end to bullying.

Jakob, aged 8

I would like
to everyone be
nice to me and play with
me

Addressing the stigma of homelessness

Reflecting the shame and embarrassment that many of the children felt about being homeless and living in a Family Hub, a number of the children aged 13–17 in particular wanted to see the issue of stigma and prejudice addressed. They want people who are not homeless to have a greater understanding of their situation and not to feel judged. This would help the children to deal with their own situations.

“People always think the homeless are drug addicts, alcoholics, it’s much more than just that, it can be ordinary well off people. I don’t want people to judge because it can be people like me”. (Anna, aged 16)

“I know when people imagine homeless people they think of people living on the streets, and living rough but we’re normal people, we’re normal families going to school, we’re normal”. (Amelia, aged 16)

Cristina, aged 15 and her sister Lara, aged 13

Don't discriminate
against us.

Just because
we are homeless,
it doesn't mean we are
not putting the effort to find a
home or we are not hard-working

Address the use of drugs and alcohol in the Family Hubs

A small number of parents had concerns about the drug use and alcohol consumption by some residents that led to disruption and noise in a small number of Family Hubs. They recommended that steps are taken to eliminate these practices for the benefit of their children.

“I think what would be helpful to me and Cathal to change about this place, and obviously help a lot of our residents is if it was drug-free ... This is like, this isn't a single people's hostel, this isn't a men's hostel, it's not a women's hostel. It's a Family Hub. There's children in here”. (Mother of Cathal, aged 2)

“Maybe like become more cautious of who they are taking in. There's some people now that like would be drinking every night, you know, and taking drugs, not like hard drugs ... I don't want my kids around seeing people drunk or high ... kids don't understand, but they can sense that”. (Mother of Jack, aged 3 and Karina, aged 2)

Review of the Family Hubs

A number of the parents of the under-fives and older children were clear in their views that the Family Hubs are not appropriate accommodation for families. Parents in particular were concerned that the Family Hubs were becoming a long-term solution to family homelessness and they and their children would be forgotten about. They expressed concern that while the Government were continuing to open and invest in Family Hubs, no one had looked at whether they were effective or how they were operating. To this end they recommended that regular reviews of the Family Hubs are undertaken.

“[The Government should] carry out regular reviews of how the Hubs are working”. (Father of Ben, aged 5)

Appendix –

Becoming Homeless

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Becoming Homeless

In addition to addressing the questions posed, a number of participants, particularly the parents of those under five years and children aged 13–17 years, recounted how their families had become homeless. The children and parents who provided this information were keen to challenge the stigma and societal attitudes that can be associated with homeless people. Some of their stories are captured below.

Nora lives in a Family Hub with her husband and four children, Patrick, aged 10, Lucy, aged 7, John, aged 4 and Myles, aged 2.

Nora explained: *“I’ve always been in a house. I’ve always rented for over 11 years. But then the landlord sold the house”*. Despite meeting with the new landlord and attempting to reach a tenancy agreement, the new landlord wanted to make refurbishments that required the family to move out and they found themselves without a home. Nora found this very distressing:

“That’s where my little girl had passed away. Like that was our family home, basically. We had all the kids there. And I never wanted them to be in this situation. I never wanted to have to put them through this situation. So, it hurts me that I’m here, like, do you know what I mean?”

Nora blamed herself for her circumstances. She told us *“... when I was moving in here first, it made me feel like a failure as a mother, like. I couldn’t keep a roof over their heads. But as they said to me when I moved in here, like, ‘That’s not your fault’”*.

She tried to focus on the fact that their stay in the Family Hub would be very temporary, but as time went on it was hard for her to stay positive. Nora explained that

“... when we moved into these Hubs, at first it’s only supposed to be three months – because your longest stay would be three months and you’d have a house and all by then, like, but the housing crisis is that bad, there is nowhere for them to actually put us, or for them to get us to rent, like, so we basically are stuck here now again”.

Gerry works in construction. He and his wife Cáit live in a Family Hub with their two children, Oisin, aged 3 and Niamh, aged 1).

Cáit told us that they

“... were told by our landlady before we got pregnant with Niamh that she wasn't selling for 3–4 years, so we went ahead thinking we would have 2–3 years to find a place. In the space of six months it went from 3 years to 1 year to six months to 3 weeks. The day we actually moved in with my parents I went into labour. All her [Niamh] life she's never had a proper home. We were in a room in a hotel; we were in a holiday home; back in a hotel and now here in the Hub”.

Gerry explained that the hardest thing for him about the family's living situation is: *“The guilt you feel for your child. For an adult, it's so hard and for all the kids here, like I was looking at them all playing last week thinking it's so unfair on all these kids, it really is”.*

While the family were grateful that they were no longer living a hotel they agreed that *“Hubs should not become long term, for kids it's not a place for kids to be, they need a home and they need security. They are a short term fix, we were afraid we'd be forgotten once we were in here”.*

Cait explains that Gerry works in construction and that his boss sold apartments they were working on to a homeless charity. Gerry told us that his boss said: *“... they'll probably fill them with a load of drunks and they'll drink themselves to death'. And he knows us, he knows our situation, he knows Cait and the kids and everything. I tell you, I wanted to put him through the wall”.* The couple were keen to dispel the stereotypes surrounding homelessness: *“... not all the homeless are drunks or junkies. There is a thing about it. There are lot of my friends who don't know our situation and I don't want them to think differently of us and I don't want them feeling sorry for us, either”.*

Abigail is a single mum to Daniel, aged 17 months

Like many others, a number of factors, including a breakdown in Abigail's family relationships and mental health issues, led to her and Daniel becoming homeless. *"I was living with my mother in a small place, and the relationship broke down and it wasn't a good place for Daniel to be. I had mental health issues and so had she. We couldn't do it anymore, do you know. It was very hard ... And my Dad, he's homeless, so I've nobody else. So I had to avail of this service".*

Abigail was struggling with her new living situation and said that she was in denial about having to live in a Family Hub. *"I don't want to be here. I'm staying away from it all day until I have to come back to it to go to bed".*

Seana and her partner live with their son Charlie, aged 5, live in the Hub.

Seana told us how she came to be homeless: *"My landlord wanted to sell my house. It didn't sell and now she's getting more money for it and we're here".*

Seana and her partner each have children from previous relationships. Seana's stepson visits every weekend but two of her own children have refused to move into the Hub with her. They live with their grandmother, but there is not enough room for the whole family to live there together. Seana told us about the impact of this on her family life. *"I haven't lived with my two daughters for over two years now. My daughters live with their grandmother, they won't live here because it's embarrassing to live in homeless accommodation".* She told us that she visits her daughters every day but that they are reluctant to visit the Hub because they are embarrassed.

Sean is aged 16 years.

Sean can really see the benefit of living in a Family Hub in comparison to his previous experiences. He describes his life before he moved there. *"Before I became homeless I didn't have really anything... I was sleeping on a bed with a sleeping bag, a paper as a pillow. My teacher went down and got me a duvet and all food".* After this the family became homeless and moved between B&Bs. He explains his relief in getting a space in a Family Hub: *"... we were lucky to get the bleedin' room here because we weren't expecting it ... we were in a B&B then ... and then we got a phone call off my da to say 'You're getting a room in a Family Hub'".*

Anna is 16 shares a room in a Family Hub with her mother and her 14 year-old sister.

Anna described where she lived before her family became homeless: *“I did have privacy, I know I shared with my sister, but I used to go up to my room ... it’s not easy for a 16 year old to have privacy here ... We were in a hotel for two months and we’ve been here ever since and I know I won’t be here forever”.*

Like many children, Anna struggled with living in the Family Hub: *“It’s bearable, at times! A hotel is more luxurious. You can pretend you are on your holidays. You’ve a big bed. In the hotel we had a bad argument, it was stress of leaving the house and that. I didn’t want to come here at all, I thought the hotel would be better”.*

Anna found it particularly difficult to move out of her family home. She explained that *“... it’s weird leaving your own home ... you have to pack up and leave stuff in relatives homes”.* Despite this upset Anna was able to see some positives of life in a Hub. *“It’s bad but we do have a laugh about being here together. Closer in space [has made us] emotionally closer as well”.*

Amelia is 16 and lives in a Family Hub sharing a room with her two young brothers, aged 10 and 8 years and her parents.

The Family Hub has offered Amelia some stability but the memory of having to leave her home is still difficult for her: *“We were in B&Bs for five or six months, we had to change every two weeks ... It was hard moving from the neighbourhood we lived in for 9 years. We had to pack everything into boxes”.* Now space is one of her main challenges: *“When we lived in a house I had my own bedroom, whereas we’re all together, it’s kinda cramped”.*



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